A week in the life of the world | *Global edition*
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The Guardian Weekly

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The Guardian Weekly



Eyewitness
Mexico

PHOTOGRAPH:
MARIO TAMA/POOL VIA REUTERS

We have splashdown
Nasa's uncrewed Orion capsule is towed away by US navy divers after it landed safely in the Pacific ocean, west of Baja California. It brought to completion the first flight of Nasa's new lunar programme, which aims to return astronauts to the surface of the moon by 2025.

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A failed coup, people power in Iran and pages of inspiration

It's been a seismic year for news in Europe but one of the oddest stories came last week when 25 conspirators were arrested in Germany, accused of plotting to overthrow the government. The eclectic grouping, known as the Reichsbürger plotters, espoused a far-right ideology but hailed largely from the centre of respectable German society, headed up by an elderly minor aristocrat and including family doctors, judges, a celebrity chef and an opera singer.

Berlin bureau chief Philip Oltermann asks how far the plotters might seriously have got and what it all means for Germany. And columnist Jonathan Freedland argues that the case is more evidence that the greatest terror threat facing the world no longer comes from radical Islam, but the white far-right.

The big story *Page 12*→

Three months have passed since fervent anti-regime demonstrations began in Iran. As more grim details emerged of public executions of protesters and the grotesque targeting of women by security forces, Christopher de Bellaigue takes a deep look at the movement, in particular the role played by women and young people, and asks what it might take for a popular revolution to succeed.

Iran's moment of truth *Page 34*→

If, like us, you've been scratching your head for good gift ideas this festive season, our entire Culture section this week is taken up with the best books of 2022, from fiction to science and everything in between. Dive in and take your pick!

The best books of 2022 *Page 51*→



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On the cover
Could the Reichsbürger conspirators have posed a serious threat to Germany's order, or were they just a bunch of eccentrics? "I don't believe … [they] would have succeeded," said Peter Neumann, a terrorism expert at King's College London. "The important question is how much damage they could have caused trying to do so." *Illustration: Guardian Design*

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Global report

Headlines from the last seven days

1 EUROPEAN UNION

MEPs arrested as European parliament offices searched

Belgian police have searched European parliament offices as part of a growing investigation into alleged bribery and corruption, as senior EU leaders warned the credibility of the bloc was at stake.

Belgium's federal prosecutor announced on Monday it had carried out 20 searches since last Friday, including 19 at private homes and one at the European parliament offices. Earlier in the day, Greek authorities ordered the seizure of assets belonging to an MEP implicated in the bribery investigation. Four people have been charged with participation in a criminal organisation, money laundering and corruption as part of a major investigation into attempts by a Gulf State, named in the Belgian media as Qatar, to buy influence with large sums of money and gifts.

None of the suspects have been formally identified, but Belgian media have named the Greek Socialist MEP Eva Kaili as among the four arrested. MEPs are expected to vote imminently on whether to strip Kaili, who on Monday was expelled from the parliament's Socialists and Democrats group, of her status as one of the parliament's 14 vice-presidents.



2 PERU



Early election compromise fails to quell protests

Widespread unrest continued across the country, particularly in rural strongholds of former president Pedro Castillo, despite new president Dina Boluarte announcing that she will send Congress a bill to bring general elections forward two years, to April 2024. Her decision came after at least seven people died during protests demanding elections after the ousting of Castillo.

Boluarte was sworn in last week after Castillo was sacked by Congress and arrested for attempting to shut down the legislature in an effort to prevent an impeachment vote against him. Demonstrators demanded elections rather than allowing Boluarte to stay in power until Castillo's term ends in 2026.

3 GUATEMALA

Ex-president and deputy found guilty of corruption

A court found a former president and his vice-president guilty on two charges of corruption, in one of the most high-profile corruption cases in Guatemala.

The ruling against former president Otto Pérez Molina and his vice-president, Roxana Baldetti, on charges of illicit association and customs fraud come as a relief amid what is seen as the rollback of anti-corruption efforts. But the two were absolved of charges of illicit enrichment, due to lack of evidence. The decision comes more than seven years after the two were forced to resign from office.

4 UNITED STATES

Warnock wins Georgia as Sinema goes independent

The Democratic incumbent, Raphael Warnock, won the Georgia Senate runoff to secure his first full term, defeating the Republican candidate, Herschel Walker. Warnock delivered a 51st seat to bolster his party's majority in the chamber.

The runoff was the latest in a series of very close races in Georgia, reflecting the state's relatively new status as a toss-up after decades of being considered safely Republican.

Separately, however, Senator Kyrsten Sinema switched her political affiliation to independent, leaving the Democratic party. Sinema indicated last week that she would not caucus with the Republican party. Two other senators - Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Angus King of Maine - are registered as independents but generally caucus with Democrats.

Sinema said her shift came as a growing number of people in her state were also declaring themselves politically independent, rejecting the Republican and Democratic political labels.

5 UNITED STATES

Former crypto boss arrested in the Bahamas

Bahamas police arrested former FTX CEO Sam Bankman-Fried, the country's attorney general said on Monday, adding that the Bahamas had received formal notification from the US of criminal charges against him. Bankman-Fried is expected to be extradited to the US, the attorney general's office for the Bahamas said, but did not disclose the charges.

The former CEO had been expected on Tuesday to make his first public appearance since FTX's collapse before US lawmakers. Bankman-Fried's arrest was confirmed by the US attorney for the southern district of New York.

GW

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UK headlines p11→

6 UNITED STATES

Lockerbie suspect 'abducted from home' by warlord

A former Libyan intelligence operative accused of preparing the bomb that brought down a Pan Am flight over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988, killing 270 people, was taken into US custody after being abducted from his home by forces loyal to Abdel Ghani al-Kikili, the Guardian has been told. Known as "Gheniwa", al-Kikili commands the Stability Support Authority of the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity.

Mohammed Abouagela Masud appeared in court in Washington DC on Monday, accused of having set the timer for the bomb. The Department of Justice gave no details of how he had arrived in the US.

7 CANADA



Works on hold at site where bodies are believed to be

Operations were paused at a landfill site where the bodies of at least two Indigenous murder victims are believed to be buried, amid mounting frustration that authorities are not doing enough to recover the bodies.

Police in Winnipeg this month charged Jeremy Skibicki, 35, with the murder of Morgan Beatrice Harris and Marcedes Myran, of Long Plain First Nation, months after he was accused of killing Rebecca Contois, from O-Chi-Chak-Ko-Sipi First Nation. He was also charged in the death of a fourth unidentified victim.

8 FRANCE



Buried treasures of Notre Dame give up their secrets

Two lead sarcophaguses discovered under the nave at Notre Dame Cathedral have begun giving up their secrets, French scientists announced. The first contains the remains of a high priest who died in 1710 after what experts say appeared to be a sedentary life. The occupant of the second is believed to be a young noble who could have lived as far back as the 14th century. The tombs were uncovered as part of a cache of items buried under the floor of the transept crossing at the heart of the cathedral that was ravaged by fire in April 2019.

9 RUSSIA

Kremlin scraps Putin's year-end press conference

Vladimir Putin will not hold a year-end press conference for the first time in at least a decade, in what Kremlin-watchers view as a break with protocol due to his war in Ukraine. The marathon events are traditionally an occasion for the Russian president to burnish his image, a spectacle allowing Putin to play the populist on national TV each December.

On Monday, the Kremlin announced it would not hold the conference this year. There would also be no new year Kremlin reception, officials said, possibly a decision influenced by the reluctance to celebrate because the war has not gone to plan.

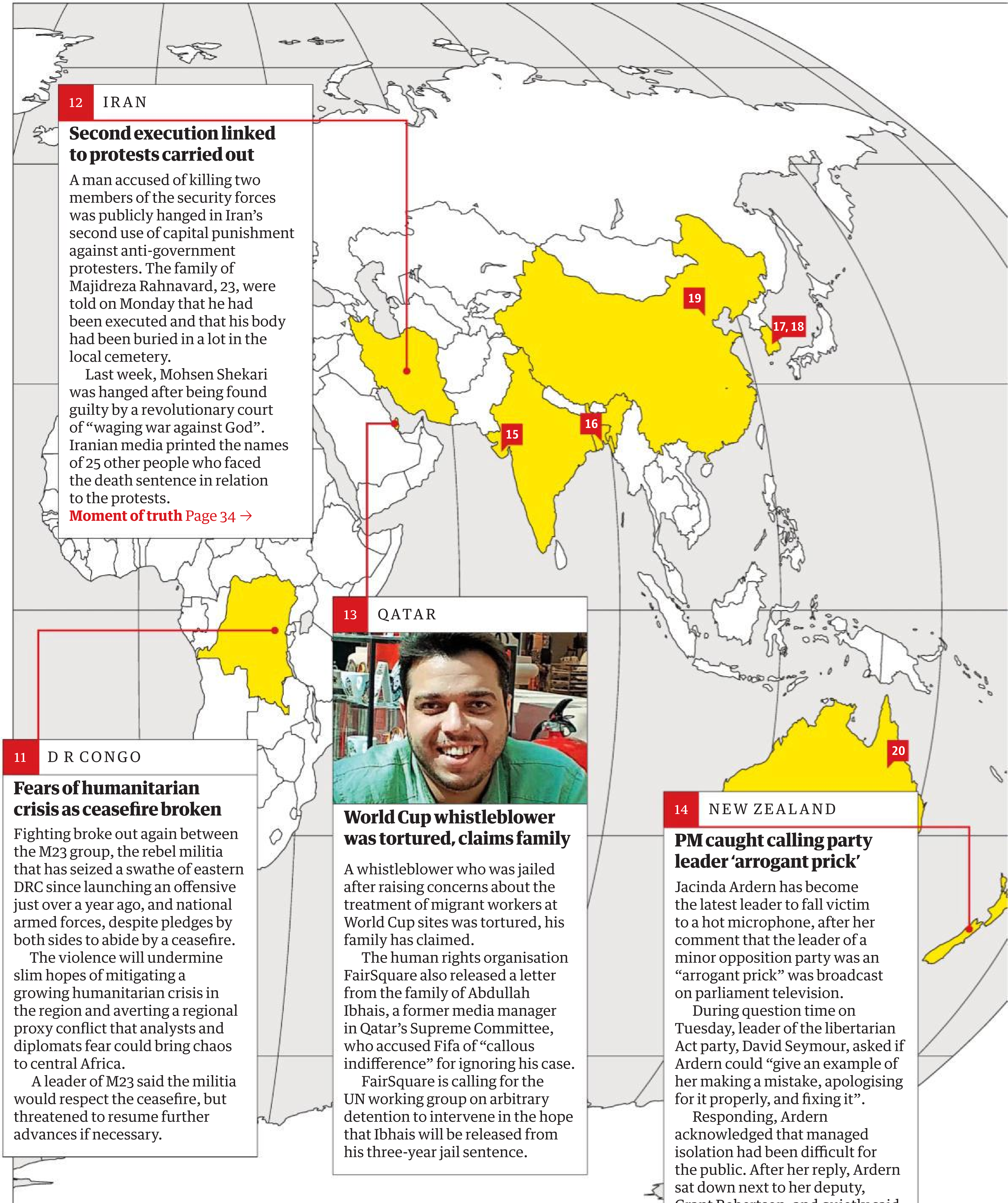
10 RUSSIA

Veteran opposition figure jailed for anti-war posts

A court sentenced opposition politician Ilya Yashin to eight and a half years in prison, in the most high-profile case to date of a Russian dissident being jailed for opposing the invasion of Ukraine. Yashin was tried on charges of spreading false information meant to discredit the Russian army, under a law introduced after Russia launched its invasion, due to a series of posts in May about the murder and torture of Ukrainian civilians by Russian troops in the town of Bucha.

Yashin was one of a small group of vocal opponents to the war who chose not to leave the country, saying earlier this year that he believed that "anti-war voices sound louder and more convincing if the person remains in Russia".

Spotlight *Page 17* →



11 D R CONGO

Fears of humanitarian crisis as ceasefire broken

Fighting broke out again between the M23 group, the rebel militia that has seized a swathe of eastern DRC since launching an offensive just over a year ago, and national armed forces, despite pledges by both sides to abide by a ceasefire.

The violence will undermine slim hopes of mitigating a growing humanitarian crisis in the region and averting a regional proxy conflict that analysts and diplomats fear could bring chaos to central Africa.

A leader of M23 said the militia would respect the ceasefire, but threatened to resume further advances if necessary.

12 IRAN

Second execution linked to protests carried out

A man accused of killing two members of the security forces was publicly hanged in Iran's second use of capital punishment against anti-government protesters. The family of Majidreza Rahnavard, 23, were told on Monday that he had been executed and that his body had been buried in a lot in the local cemetery.

Last week, Mohsen Shekari was hanged after being found guilty by a revolutionary court of "waging war against God". Iranian media printed the names of 25 other people who faced the death sentence in relation to the protests.

Moment of truth Page 34 →

13 QATAR

World Cup whistleblower was tortured, claims family

A whistleblower who was jailed after raising concerns about the treatment of migrant workers at World Cup sites was tortured, his family has claimed.

The human rights organisation FairSquare also released a letter from the family of Abdullah Ibhais, a former media manager in Qatar's Supreme Committee, who accused Fifa of "callous indifference" for ignoring his case.

FairSquare is calling for the UN working group on arbitrary detention to intervene in the hope that Ibhais will be released from his three-year jail sentence.

14 NEW ZEALAND

PM caught calling party leader 'arrogant prick'

Jacinda Ardern has become the latest leader to fall victim to a hot microphone, after her comment that the leader of a minor opposition party was an "arrogant prick" was broadcast on parliament television.

During question time on Tuesday, leader of the libertarian Act party, David Seymour, asked if Ardern could "give an example of her making a mistake, apologising for it properly, and fixing it".

Responding, Ardern acknowledged that managed isolation had been difficult for the public. After her reply, Ardern sat down next to her deputy, Grant Robertson, and quietly said "such an arrogant prick".

15 INDIA



BJP shores up electoral support in PM's home state

Prime minister Narendra Modi was given a significant boost as his Bharatiya Janata party won a landslide victory in his home state of Gujarat, a sign of the party's enduring popularity.

Gujarat has long been a stronghold of the Hindu nationalist BJP, which has won seven consecutive elections there since 1995, but the result was the BJP's biggest electoral success in the state on record. It looks on course to win 156 seats out of 182, giving it an 80% majority, the highest achieved by any party in the state's history.

The National Congress party, once India's dominant political force, lost more than 60 seats. The relatively new Aam Aadmi party, which controls Delhi and Punjab, secured four seats.

17 SOUTH KOREA

Commission to investigate dozens of foreign adoptions

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission will investigate the cases of dozens of South Korean adoptees in Europe and the US who suspect their origins were falsified or obscured during a child export frenzy in the mid-to-late 20th century.

Last Thursday's decision opens what could be South Korea's most far-reaching inquiry into foreign adoptions, as frustration over broken family connections grows, and now grownup children demand government attention.

The adopted South Koreans are believed to be the world's largest diaspora of adoptees. In the past six decades about 200,000 children - mostly girls - were adopted overseas. Most were placed with white parents in the US and Europe during the 1970s and 80s.

After a meeting last Tuesday, the commission decided to investigate 34 adoptees who were sent to Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium and the US from the 1960s to the early 1990s. The adoptees say they were wrongfully removed from their families through falsified documents and corrupt practices.

19 CHINA

Mobile tracking among abandoned Covid measures

Beijing scrapped its primary Covid tracking app in the latest rollback of pandemic control measures, just days after abruptly abandoning its long-running zero-Covid policy.

The government-run "communications itinerary card" tracked people's movements using phone signals, identifying those who had been in high-risk areas.

The national app was a central pillar of the technological infrastructure that guided the government's Covid response. It is the latest scheme in China's zero-Covid policy to be dismantled. Testing requirements have been greatly reduced, domestic travel restrictions lifted, and infected people allowed to quarantine at home.

Spotlight *Page 20* →



16 BANGLADESH

Opposition leaders held in government crackdown

Two top leaders of Bangladesh's main opposition party have been arrested amid a violent crackdown on opponents of the government during which at least seven people have been shot dead and thousands arrested.

Sheikh Hasina's government has launched a repressive campaign against the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist party (BNP), which has been holding rallies calling for her resignation. Last Saturday's rally ended with the BNP putting forward 10 demands to the Awami League government. The opposition is calling for new elections.

18 SOUTH KOREA

People to become younger as age counting changed

The traditional method of counting ages is to be scrapped and the international standard adopted in a change that will knock one or two years off people's ages on official documents.

South Koreans are deemed to be a year old when they are born, and a year is added every 1 January. The unusual - and increasingly unpopular - custom means a baby born on New Year's Eve becomes two years old as soon as the clock strikes midnight.

The tradition has attracted criticism from politicians who believe it makes South Korea appear behind the times.

20 AUSTRALIA

Two police officers among dead in ambush shooting

Six people died, including two police officers, at a remote Queensland property after an ambush described as a "ruthless" and "cold-blooded" killing.

The officers and a neighbour were shot dead on Monday night and their alleged killers - a former school principal, his brother and sister-in-law - were later killed in a firefight with heavily armed tactical police.

The Queensland police commissioner, Katarina Carroll, said the incident was devastating for the victims' families and the police force. The reason behind the initial shooting was unknown.

DEATHS



George 'Johnny' Johnson
Last of the Dambusters who served as a bomb-aimer during the RAF's most audacious raid of the second world war. He died on 7 December, aged 101.

Angelo Badalamenti
American composer best known for his work with screen director David Lynch on Twin Peaks and Blue Velvet. He died on 11 December, aged 85.

Dorothy Pitman Hughes
Pioneering Black feminist who co-founded Ms with Gloria Steinem and set up the first shelter for battered women in New York City. She died on 1 December, aged 84.

Jet Black
Drummer with the Stranglers. He died on 6 December, aged 84.

Beryl Grey
Celebrated British ballerina who later dedicated herself to dance training. She died on 10 December, aged 95.



SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT



◀ An artist's impression of SKA-Low on Wajarri country in Western Australia. Its tree-like antennas will be eight times more sensitive than existing telescopes and will map the sky 135 times faster

AUSTRALIAN DEPARTMENT OF INDUSTRY, SCIENCE AND RESOURCES

NUCLEAR RESEARCH

Breakthrough could mean 'near-limitless energy'

Researchers have reportedly made a breakthrough in the quest to unlock a "near-limitless, safe, clean" source of energy: they have got more energy out of a nuclear fusion reaction than they put in.

Nuclear fusion involves smashing together light elements such as hydrogen to form heavier elements, releasing a huge burst of energy in the process. The approach, which gives rise to the heat and light of the sun and other stars, has been hailed as having huge potential as a sustainable, low-carbon energy source. However, since nuclear fusion research began in the 1950s, researchers have been unable to demonstrate a positive energy gain.

It was expected to be confirmed this week by the National Ignition Facility at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California.

But experts stressed that while the results would be an important proof of principle, the technology is a long way from being a mainstay of the energy landscape.

ASTRONOMY

Work begins on world's most powerful radio telescopes

Construction of the world's largest radio astronomy observatory, the Square Kilometre Array, has begun in Australia after three decades in development. The SKA will enable scientists to look back to early in the history of the universe and will investigate dark energy, why the universe is expanding and potentially seek extraterrestrial life.

The SKA will initially involve two telescope arrays - one in remote Western Australia, comprising 131,072 tree-like antennas. A second array of 197 traditional dishes will be built in South Africa's Karoo region.

PREHISTORY

DNA from 2m years ago reveals a warmer lost Arctic region

Two-million-year-old DNA from northern Greenland has revealed that the region was once home to mastodons, lemmings and geese.

The breakthrough in ancient DNA analysis pushes back the DNA record by 1m years to a time when the Arctic region was 11-19C warmer than the present day. The analysis reveals that the northern peninsula of Greenland, now a polar desert, once featured boreal forests of poplar and birch trees teeming with wildlife.

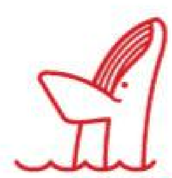
Research by Prof Eske Willerslev of the University of Cambridge and the University of Copenhagen and colleagues - published in the journal Nature - resulted in the DNA of 41 samples being sequenced and identified. The ancient samples were found deep in the Kap København Formation, a sediment deposit that built up over 20,000 years and lay undisturbed by humans for 2m years.

WILDLIFE

Puffin nesting sites likely to be lost by end of century

The majority of puffin nesting sites in western Europe could be lost by the end of the century due to climate breakdown, a report has warned.

Researchers from the Zoological Society of London and the University of Cambridge have published a guide to how 47 species of bird that breed along the Atlantic coastline can be protected from worsening conditions, using the expertise of 80 conservationists and policymakers across 15 European countries.



5k

The distance in kilometres swum by a humpback whale called Moon, despite having a broken back. Researchers have tracked Moon's annual migrations, from the waters of British Columbia to Hawaii, for the past decade

Global report
United Kingdom

ENERGY

Backlash over government approval for new coalmine

Senior steel industry figures rejected claims that their demand for coal drove the government's divisive decision to sanction the first new UK coalmine for 30 years.

Levelling up secretary Michael Gove's decision to approve the mine at Whitehaven in Cumbria last week has already faced a backlash in the UK and beyond, with John Kerry, Joe Biden's special envoy for climate, warning he was examining the decision.

Government officials have insisted that the coal produced by the mine will be used to make steel, while other supporters said the steel industry will need a domestic source of coal.

Mark Jenkinson, a local Tory MP backing the project, said there was "no way of making new steel without it". He added: "Steel underpins every single renewable technology that we need to employ to hit our net zero target. There is no sense in importing all of our coking coal, which would be an abdication of our climate commitments."

But industry experts insisted that demand for the coal from UK and European steel makers was a myth that had been repeated for years. "The UK steel industry has been clear that the coal from the West Cumbria mine has limited potential due to its high sulphur levels," said Chris McDonald, chief executive of the Materials Processing Institute, which serves as the UK's national centre for steel research.

In its report submitted to ministers, the Planning Inspectorate claimed the mine would have "an overall neutral effect on climate change".



Our 2022 charity appeal p25→

Eyewitness

Smoke signals

A woman waves a smoke flare as striking mail workers and supporters gather in Parliament Square, London, to listen to speeches by union leaders and representatives. Royal Mail workers are staging strikes throughout December in an escalating row over pay, jobs and conditions. Nurses, paramedics, rail employees and Border Force officials are also staging walkouts in a wave of winter industrial action. The army has been drafted in to cover some key functions during the strikes.

LEON NEAL/GETTY



UK NEWS

Three boys dead after lake fall as cold snap continues

Three boys aged eight, 10 and 11 died after falling through thin ice at a lake near Solihull in the West Midlands. Earlier this week a fourth boy, aged six, was in a critical condition in hospital after the incident last Sunday. All four children were in cardiac arrest when they were pulled from the lake at Babbs Mill Park.

Members of the public, police officers and firefighters were first to attempt to pull the children to safety, some going into the freezing waters waist-deep.

The tragedy happened in the middle of the first major cold snap of the winter across the UK, with temperatures dropping below -15C in Scotland.

The colder weather could prompt a sharp increase in excess death this winter as financial worries force vulnerable households to skimp on heating, charities warned. The sub-zero temperatures were forecast to continue to the end of this week.

Spotlight *Page 24* →

ENVIRONMENT

Lizard reserve becomes Cornish common land

More than 100 hectares of west Cornwall has finally been recognised as common land, protecting it for the public 140 years after it was threatened with enclosure. Lizard Downs was authorised for enclosure – the act of taking ownership of common land – in 1880 but the proposed fencing off never happened. It remained unoccupied but attempts by campaigners to register the 116 hectares as commons were derailed by objections.

As a result, although the 116 hectares is managed by Natural England as part of the Lizard national nature reserve, its status remained uncertain.



JERSEY

Nine feared dead after suspected gas explosion

Nine people were feared to have been killed and a criminal investigation could be launched after a suspected gas explosion destroyed a block of flats in the centre of Jersey's capital, St Helier.

After a desperate search among the debris last weekend, the island's chief of police, Robin Smith, confirmed that five people had died but said a further four remained missing, with the mission no longer in rescue mode.

Alongside an effort to identify and recover all of the remains, which Jersey's fire chief, Paul Brown, said could take weeks, an inquiry has begun into the action of the fire service in the hours before the explosion at 4am last Saturday.

Less than eight hours before the three-storey apartments were enveloped in a fireball, firefighters were called to the site at 8.36pm last Friday after residents reported a suspected gas leak. Brown said he would be "transparent" about the events leading up to the explosion.



17.8%

The percentage of residents of Wales – around 538,300 people – able to speak the Welsh language, the lowest-ever proportion recorded in a census. A century ago, 37% of residents spoke Welsh

Enemies of the state

The big story
Reichsbürger plot



GERMANY

Were the Reichsbürger plotters a sinister rightwing group aiming to overthrow Germany's government, or a ragtag bunch of internet-fuelled conspiracy theorists?

By *Philip Oltermann*
BERLIN

The time to forgive and forget had passed, the grey-bearded man said, his back to the turquoise Adriatic sea as he gesticulated towards the camera. "Those people who bullied us, who locked us up", he said, were about to face a reckoning in an "epochal upheaval" that would usher in a new judicial and political order. Change was imminent - a matter of weeks.

"If everything goes to plan, we'll do it before Christmas," the man, who calls himself "General Eder", promised in a video uploaded last month to a website popular among far-right conspiracy theorists.

Last Wednesday, 64-year-old Maximilian Eder was arrested in the Italian city of Perugia, as part of Germany's series of raids against rightwing extremism. Along with 24 co-conspirators, Eder is accused of hatching a plan to overthrow the state by violent means, install a shadow government headed by a minor German aristocrat, and reach out to Russia to renegotiate post-second world war treaties.

Even though none of the coup plotters were well-known public figures, their social background raised eyebrows: they included family doctors, judges, gourmet chefs and opera singers, and several of the ragtag bunch of wannabe revolutionaries seemed to have been radicalised in the well-off, respectable centre of society.

Their ring was completed by men with a military background, such as Eder: a genuine commander of one of the Bundeswehr's armoured infantry battalions between 1998 and 2000, who spent time serving in Kosovo and Afghanistan and was a founding member of Germany's special forces command (KSK). An ex-commander at paratrooper battalion 251 was named as the aspiring leader of the terrorist group's "military arm".



▶ Police arrest the group's political leader, Heinrich XIII, in Frankfurt
BORIS ROESSLER/DPA/AP

But it was the inclusion of a former Bundestag delegate of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) that rang the loudest alarm bells: as an ex-MP, Birgit Malsack-Winkemann would have had knowledge of security arrangements and special access privileges to the complex of parliamentary buildings in the heart of Berlin.

A list of potential targets, retrieved from a suspect's home during the raids, reportedly included seven members of Germany's parliament, including the Green foreign minister Annalena Baerbock, conservative opposition leader Friedrich Merz, and the co-leader and general secretary of the Social Democratic party, Saskia Esken and Kevin Kühnert.

Germany's president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, said he was "deeply concerned" by the alleged plot, describing it as a "new level".

Whether the group of conspirators would have posed a serious threat to Germany's democratic order, or were just a bunch of eccentrics with a hyperactive imagination, has been subject to debate .

The fact that newspapers and camera crews had been informed of the dawn raids in advance has led to criticism that the operation was designed as a PR job for an intelligence community →

Plot suspects
Celebrity chef and judge among arrests
page 15 →

New face of terrorism
Growing threat is from racist extremists
page 16 →







that has been slow to uncover similar, arguably more threatening plans by far-right "preppers".

The conservative Swiss daily Neue Zürcher Zeitung felt "the German security agencies wanted to flex their muscles in front of the entire world"; the Berliner Zeitung said the arrests had come across as a "well-orchestrated PR stunt" zeroing in on no more than "25 senile loons".

The fact the raids took place a day before Germany's nationwide "alert day", intended to test warning systems and sensitise people to emergency scenarios, had to be more than a coincidence, others suggested.

Within hours of the arrests, newspapers published detailed articles outlining the plotters' colourful backgrounds, which were soon picked up around the globe.

One issue is whether the media strategy may have undermined the operation's real intention, to seize incriminating evidence to bring the plotters to trial. The Berlin newspaper Tagesspiegel last Friday printed an interview with Eder's neighbour in his home town of Eppenschlag, Bavaria, who said the pensioner had called her from Croatia a few days earlier. "It could be that the police will come around next week," the ex-soldier is reported to have said.

The retired military commander has been on the radar of the intelligence agencies since at least the summer of 2021, when he joined German anti-vax marches in uniform and promised to protect protesters from the police.

The other question is whether a crackdown on Eder's conspiracists was justified by the threat they posed to national security. His video message, sharing his revolutionary plan with the rest of the world, may hint less at strategic geniuses plotting in the shadows than old men trapped in the echo chamber of the internet. But then, the corner of the rightwing extremist spectrum Eder and his circle inhabit has flourished in recent years, precisely because it wasn't taken seriously enough.

▲ From left: Police raid houses in Berlin last week; a police car leaves a branch of the federal court of justice; Reichsbürger demonstration in Berlin in 2019
CARSTEN KOALL/GETTY; ULI DECK/DPA; ALAMY

'They wouldn't have succeeded, but what damage they could have caused'

Prosecutors described the arrested suspects as "supporters of conspiracy myths, from a conglomerate of narratives relating to the ideologies of the Reichsbürger and QAnon ideologies". The beliefs of the former group, the "citizens of empire", are laid out in a 2019 address at a Swiss business forum by Heinrich XIII, Prince Reuss of Greiz, the 71-year-old aristocrat who has been described as the group's political ringleader and who had envisioned himself ruling over the post-coup state at least in a temporary capacity.

Complaining that his dynasty had been dispossessed of its belongings through wars brought about by Freemasons and Jewish financiers, Heinrich XIII claimed that modern Germany "has only been made an administrative structure of the allies" – a standard trope of the Reichsbürger movement.

In dismissing the international treaty that enabled German reunification in the early 90s, its adherents claim that the Reich continues to exist since Germany signed an armistice but not a peace treaty after the second world war. The federal republic is illegitimate – a mere "simulation of a state". Which empire to restore, the Reichsbürger cannot always agree.

"The Reichsbürger scene is very internally divided, and Heinrich XIII wasn't a particularly dominant figure in the movement at large," said Nicholas Potter, an analyst monitoring far-right networks for the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, which campaigns against racism and antisemitism. "Some of them want to bring back the *Kaiserreich* [the imperial German state between 1871 and 1918], others the Third Reich [Hitler's Germany]."

Heinrich XIII demonstrated the movement's internal divisions in a letter dated 9 June 2020, which was later shared on a German QAnon Telegram channel. In his screed, he warns that a Germany led by Georg Friedrich, Prince of Prussia, the current head of the Prussian branch of the House of Hohenzollern that used to rule the German empire, would be a "monarchy at the mercy of the Allies". Heinrich XIII, by contrast, promised to pursue the "correct structure under international law" by reconstituting a member state of the *Kaiserreich*.

He envisioned the new empire as a slimmed-down state. Voting law would be reformed. In the letter, he complained that his plan required not only the support of the three allies ("USA, RUS, UK"), but also of armies of patriots "who sadly cannot be easily consolidated".

Such pompous fantasies, paired with hectoring legalese, used to make it easy to dismiss the Reichsbürger scene. Even after a policeman was shot dead by one of the fringe movement's adherents in 2016, the BfV, Germany's domestic intelligence agency, declined to take steps towards systematic surveillance. Though the conspiracy theory had several hundred followers, not all of them could be classified as rightwing extremists, the BfV said at the time.

It only began to take the movement more seriously in the year of the departure of its president Hans-Georg Maaßen, who has since been spreading conspiracy theories about the pandemic and the World Economic Forum on social media. That year, the agency counted 19,000 Reichsbürger across Germany, a number that has since risen to 21,000.

"Reichsbürger were around before the pandemic, but at protests against lockdown measures and vaccines they found a lot of open ears," said Potter.

One of the few unifying features of the movement is a tendency to hoard guns and ammunition. German police found weapons in 50 of the 150 properties they searched, including two rifles, one pistol, swords and crossbows: an insufficient arsenal to overthrow a country of 83 million, but enough to carry out a targeted terror attack.

Whether the group had stashed away further weapons elsewhere remains unclear. In May 2020, a member of the German special forces command was found to have removed guns and ammunition from the army's reserves and deposited them at a secret location, apparently in preparation for a "Day X" scenario of social collapse.

Peter Neumann, a terrorism expert and professor of security studies at King's College London, likened last week's jokes about senile fantasists in tweed to early British media coverage of Abu Hamza, the former imam of London's Finsbury Park mosque.

"Hamza was portrayed as this ridiculous clown with a hook and an eyepatch, and for years even the security agencies didn't take him seriously", said Neumann. "Only later did we find out that he was instrumental in bringing hundreds of people into terrorist networks."

Germany's latest domestic intelligence report puts the potentially violent number of Reichsbürger at 2,100 – comparable with the 1,950 individuals listed last year as having potential for Islamist terrorist violence. While the "citizens of empire" were mostly less well organised than supporters of Isis, Neumann said, they were also more likely to have access to arms.

"I don't believe ... [they] would have succeeded in overthrowing the government," he added. "The important question is how much damage they could have caused in trying to do so." *Observer*

PHILIP OLTERMANN IS THE GUARDIAN AND OBSERVER'S BERLIN BUREAU CHIEF

THE RAIDS

3,000 *Police officers mobilised for the operation*

150 *Addresses across Germany raided by police*

25 *Co-conspirators arrested in the nationwide swoop*

Under arrest
Star chef and judge among suspects

By *Kate Connolly*
BERLIN

A celebrity gourmet chef whose daughter is the girlfriend of the Real Madrid footballer David Alaba and an ex-police officer once tasked with protecting Jewish communities from terror attacks are among the figures to have been linked to the foiled Reichsbürger coup plan in Germany, with further arrests expected as investigations continue.

Details emerging after the biggest ever national police operation against rightwing extremism indicate that suspects may have been informed in advance of the raids, in which 3,000 police officers targeted more than 150 addresses across Germany, and in Austria and Italy, making 25 arrests.

The number of suspects had risen to 54 by last Friday, with more arrests expected. Weapons were found at more than 50 locations, including rifles and ammunition, according to the Federal Criminal Police Office.

The group, inspired by Reichsbürger ideology that the modern German state is illegitimate, had planned to storm the Reichstag building and arrest parliamentarians before overthrowing the government and installing a regime with a 71-year-old aristocrat as head of state.



▶ Chef Frank Heppner was responsible for recruitment

Frank Heppner, a star cook from Munich, who was arrested at a five-star hotel in the Austrian ski resort of Kitzbühel where he worked, was allegedly a member of the command staff of the military arm of the terrorist group, responsible for recruiting members, obtaining weapons and other equipment, as well as building a bug-proof communication and IT structure. He was also tasked with running the canteen that would have provided meals for the members of the so-called "New German Army".

The Austrian daily Die Presse, citing investigators, said Heppner was also to be the personal cook to Heinrich XIII, Prince of Reuß, after he was installed as king. It said Heppner provided the group with money, cooking utensils, a camper van and an emergency generator.

Heppner's daughter, Shalimar, is in a relationship with Alaba, a professional footballer who plays for Real Madrid and captains the Austrian national team. The couple have a son who was born in 2019. Alaba was not responding to requests for comment, according to German media who tried to contact him.

Among others alleged to have been part of the group was an ex-police officer once tasked with protecting Jewish communities from terror attacks. Michael Fritsch was arrested with his partner, Melanie Ritter, near Hanover in northern Germany.

Fritsch was suspended from duty in 2020 and later sacked, after he appeared at protests organised by Covid deniers. He later became a parliamentary candidate for DieBasis, the political party of the Covid-denying Querdenker movement. His legal appeals process against his dismissal is still outstanding.

The far-right Alternative für Deutschland continued to try to distance itself last week from its former member, Birgit Malsack-Winkemann, a serving judge who was arrested at her home in western Berlin for allegedly being one of the key plotters. Her post-coup role was to have been justice minister.

KATE CONNOLLY IS THE GUARDIAN'S BERLIN CORRESPONDENT



▶ Michael Fritsch was sacked from the police force

◀ Judge Birgit Malsack-Winkemann is among those arrested



OPINION

Far-right threat
Global terrorism today has a new face: it is young, racist and white

By *Jonathan Freedland*

Perhaps it was the tweed jacket and cravat. Or the medieval title: Heinrich XIII, Prince of Reuß. Either way, the man at the head of a suspected plot to overthrow the German government, exposed in a series of raids last week, was easy to dismiss as a joke. The country's late night TV talkshows went right ahead, mocking the 71-year-old aristocrat and his deluded dreams, along with his wardrobe.

A week earlier, the sartorial derision was aimed at Ye, the rapper formerly known as Kanye West, his face entirely obscured by a ski mask, praising Hitler and the Nazis on the set of Infowars as a guest of the bankrupted conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. Some of Ye's rantings were too much even for Jones's stomach, prompting an online chuckle - not least because a few days earlier Ye had dined with Donald Trump, along with the Holocaust-denying white supremacist Nick Fuentes. What crosses the line for Jones was apparently just fine for Trump.

But none of this is a joke. Both events - a disrupted terror plot by armed would-be "citizens of the Reich" and the legitimising of extreme racism by the de-facto leader of one of the US's two governing parties - point to a rising global threat, one that is too often regarded as either too ridiculous or too marginal to be menacing. That threat lives almost entirely on the internet, its regular foot soldiers neither European nobility nor rap superstars but, says one who monitors it closely, "young, white, anti-immigrant neo-Nazis, networked in an online subculture that glorifies and generates terror".

The danger may incubate on screens, but it doesn't stay there. Recall the massacre of 92 mostly young Norwegians in 2011. Or the slaughter of 49 at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019. Or the mass killing at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh six months earlier. Or the gunning down of 10 Black shoppers and workers in a supermarket in Buffalo by a white teenager in May this year.

For two decades after 9/11, any talk of global extremism or a "war on terror" meant only one thing: confronting violent jihadism. That threat has not gone away. But when it comes to international terror, jihadism no longer has the stage to itself. Last week, Australia's home affairs minister warned that counter-terror laws would have to change if the country was to tackle the surging threat of far-right violence. In Germany, after the identification of some 52 suspected coup plotters, the governing party declared: "Rightwing terrorism is still the biggest threat to German democracy."

This shift demands a change in our thinking. For one thing, while jihadists dreamed of establishing their own government somewhere, those arrested in Germany, like the insurrectionists who stormed Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021, aim to topple existing governments in the west and install themselves.

Jihadism was always a broad category, but there was at least an organisational infrastructure that could be targeted. The far right is much looser and entirely leaderless, radicalising its followers chiefly by means of memes and online content. Its home comprises platforms such as 4chan or the "Terrorgram" network of channels on Telegram, where recent mass murderers are venerated.

> *"The far right is more loosely organised than jihadism, gaining followers chiefly by memes and online content*

"I've been doing this for 30 years and I've never seen stuff like this," says Nick Lowles, who runs the anti-racist campaign group Hope Not Hate. In these forums they egg each other on, sinking to ever more nihilistic depths. Those seeing this material are getting ever younger. London's Metropolitan police reports that of the 20 people under 18 arrested last year for terrorism offences, all but one were linked to extreme rightwing ideology.

Action is possible, starting with the companies that provide web-support services for the likes of 4chan. But that takes political will. And while the counter-terrorism agencies seem to be in the right place, the same cannot be said of their political masters. Lowles detects an "ideological backlash" in the UK Home Office and in the levelling-up department, "actively pushing for a change in strategy away from the far right".

Note the leaked extracts of William Shawcross's review into the Prevent counter-terrorism programme, complaining that there's been too much focus on the racist right and not enough on jihadism. Last year, for the first time, the number of referrals to Prevent relating to the far right outstripped those for Islamist extremism.

You can see why some are more comfortable chasing Muslim extremists than extreme haters of Muslims (and of every other minority), perhaps fearing a definition that might encompass anti-Muslim rhetoric found on the mainstream right. But ideology cannot be allowed to intrude here, not when the danger is so grave ●

JONATHAN FREEDLAND IS A GUARDIAN COLUMNIST

BRAZIL

The secret road supplying a forest gold rush

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Spotlight



UKRAINE

Safety of Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant hangs in the balance

By *Julian Borger* NIKOPOL

The Russian shell that struck in the night had taken away the wall of a top-floor apartment, and in its place was freezing air blowing off the Dnieper River – and a view of Europe's biggest nuclear power station on the other bank.

The Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant's silhouette – with its two fat cooling towers and the row of six squat blocks – has become globally familiar since it was dubbed the most dangerous place on Earth: six nuclear reactors on the frontline of a catastrophic war.

On a fairly typical night last week, the Russians on the left bank of the river fired 40 shells and rockets into Nikopol, a town on the Ukrainian-held right bank, falling on its rows of five-storey blocks of flats built for factory workers in the 1960s.

After 10 months of war, the blocks are half empty, so there are fewer people to kill. The only reported casualty on this particular night was a 65-year-old man who was taken to hospital.

By the next morning, the repairs had already begun. An electrician restored power to the rest of the building, and two men were in the remains of the apartment itself, sweeping up and putting chipboard in place of absent walls.

▲ A worker carries out repairs on an apartment hit by a Russian missile in Nikopol
ALESSIO MAMO

Continued →



▲ Zaporizhzhia's nuclear plant is Europe's largest
UKRINFORM/NURPHOTO/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

4k
Number of staff left at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant out of 11k. Russia has circulated a list at checkpoints to prevent more key workers leaving

There were four loud bangs as the Ukrainian army guns on the nearby riverbank opened fire on Russian positions and, a few minutes later, Nikopol's air sirens sounded in anticipation of a Russian response, though none was forthcoming that morning.

The basements of the buildings have been turned into shelters with beds and school desks, but most of the remaining population are so inured to bombardment they just carry on with their day.

The Ukrainians insist they are extremely careful about what they shoot at, even when they receive fire from the vicinity of the Zaporizhzhia plant. Last Thursday, the Ukrainian nuclear power company, Energoatom, accused Russia of bringing Grad multiple launch rocket systems near reactor number 6, which is near the area of where spent nuclear fuel is kept. The likely aim, Energoatom alleged, was to shell Nikopol and the nearby town of Marzanets, using their position as cover.

The walls of the reactors are thick enough to withstand artillery fire, but a direct hit on the spent fuel containers could lead to the release of radioactive material into the atmosphere. Since seizing control of the power station in March, the Russians have begun building a concrete shelter over the spent fuel, but Ukrainian officials say it is being done without following the normal international safety protocols.

Last week, Russia's defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, accused Ukraine of "nuclear terrorism", saying its armed forces had fired 33 large calibre shells at the Zaporizhzhia plant over the previous two weeks. The most recent report from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which has four inspectors at the Russian-occupied site, said last Friday there had been no shelling of the plant since 20 November, although artillery fire had landed in the vicinity.

Petro Kotin, Energoatom's president, claims that the bombardments of the area around the nuclear reactors are false flag attacks carried out by Russian occupation forces. "They have two special trucks, which we know have mortars inside, which go into the forest and each time they go there, there is shelling around the plant," he told the Guardian.



▶ Dmytro Orlov, mayor of Enerhodar
ALESSIO MAMO

Dmytro Orlov, the mayor of Enerhodar, the town next to the nuclear plant that is home to its workers, claimed there was additional evidence that the shelling was coming from the Russian side. "You can hear the outgoing bang of the shooting and then the two or three seconds later the shell lands, so it is coming from very close and there aren't any Ukrainian forces that close," Orlov said in an interview on the Ukrainian side of the lines in the city of Zaporizhzhia where he continues his duties in exile.

It was not possible to verify Kotin and Orlov's accounts of the shelling, or the counter-claims from Moscow. Satellite imagery, however, has confirmed that the Russian army is storing military equipment inside the plant.

The IAEA inspectors on site could theoretically determine the trajectory of incoming rockets or shells but such detective work is not within their mandate. The agency is negotiating the creation of a security no-fire zone around the reactors, but Kyiv is insisting Russia must first withdraw all its weapons and armour from the power station, something Moscow has not so far agreed to.

Meanwhile, there is a parallel safety threat from within the plant itself: the steady attrition of its workforce over the 10 months of the conflict. Many key workers have left because of the danger to their families or because they

refused to work for the Russians. Of the 11,000-strong workforce before the full-scale invasion, just 4,000 are left.

"In some cases, there's only three people to cover a seven or eight-person shift," Orlov said. "People don't have enough rest. It causes exhaustion."

Operating under armed occupation adds to the stress. The workers still at the plant are under constant pressure to sign contracts with Rosatom, the Russian energy company, signifying acceptance of Moscow's control.

"They take the workers aside one at a time … They put pressure on through their family," Oleksii Melynchuk, a former worker at the nuclear power plant, said. Despite that pressure, he said, only about 10% of the staff at the plant have signed Rosatom contracts.

In recent days, the Russians have deactivated the electronic passes of some of the workers who have refused to sign, reducing the pool of available reactor operators even further.

Melynchuk said there were just enough staff left to maintain the plant in its current state of suspended animation, with all the reactors shut down, and two of them deliberately kept hot, to provide heating for Enerhodar.

But keeping reactors in this hot standby mode is a difficult and delicate process, adding to the burden on the operators. The situation could get worse still. The Zaporizhzhia plant is currently connected to the Ukrainian grid, but there have been times the transmission lines have been brought down by shelling, forcing the power station to fall back on diesel generators to keep the cooling system running and prevent the uranium fuel from meltdown.

If the connection to the grid was severed again, it would add to the pressure on the overstretched workforce and on the generators, which were only designed as a temporary backup. They will need maintenance and no one knows how much diesel fuel the plant has left. Once the diesel generators failed, meltdown would begin in a matter of hours.

"Those remaining at their posts are doing impossible things to keep the plant safe," Melynchuk said. "Even without the occupation, it would be very hard physically and psychologically to operate the station with the current staffing levels. But if you add the pressure from the occupiers, then it just gets harder."

JULIAN BORGER IS THE GUARDIAN'S WORLD AFFAIRS EDITOR

ANALYSIS
RUSSIA

Trading places
Arms dealer for basketball star – but did Moscow really win out?

By *Andrew Roth*

The victory lap in Moscow began even before the An-148 jet carrying the notorious arms dealer once dubbed the "merchant of death" touched down at Vnukovo airport.

Viktor Bout, arrested in 2008, had been returned to Russia more than 14 years after his arrest, much of that time spent incarcerated in the US. "The game is over," he had said as US Drug Enforcement Administration agents and Thai police burst into a hotel conference room where he thought he was meeting members of Farc, the Colombian rebel group.

Since that day, he has been something of an obsession among Russian officials, a person they claimed was framed, but who also seemed oddly important.

> **Bout has been something of an obsession among Russian officials**

Russia and Bout had long denied suspicions that he was an asset for the Russian spy services and, in his first remarks after arriving, Bout seemed to nod and wink at the belief that he held some secret value for the Kremlin. "I don't think I'm somehow important for Russian politics," he said, before adding a line now common in Russian war films and military circles: "We don't abandon our own, right?"

Using Brittney Griner, the US basketball star convicted of carrying marijuana oil through Moscow in February, just before Russia invaded Ukraine, the Kremlin found the recipe for a deal.

Russians connected to the Kremlin have treated the swap as greatly advantageous, especially as Russia is still holding several other US citizens. "It is a capitulation by America," said Maria Butina, a Russian official who was previously convicted in the US as an unregistered foreign agent. She interviewed Bout upon his return. "It shows that Russia doesn't abandon its own while America has shown its defeat."

Analysts gave a more careful evaluation, noting that Bout served more than a decade in prison and most of his contacts and knowledge will have withered with time.

"Each side will have reason to believe that it has given more than it has received," Andrey Kortunov, the head of the Russian International Affairs Council, told the Business FM radio station.

Within days of his return, Bout was revealed to have joined the pro-Kremlin far-right Liberal Democratic party (LDPR), in a move that could see him seek a seat in the Russian parliament. The party has served as a springboard for Andrei Lugovoi. In 2007 the former KGB agent who is accused by Britain of murdering the Russian dissident Alexander Litvinenko, gained a seat in the Russian Duma for the party.

The deal was all the more remarkable for coming at a time when Russia is deep in international isolation after launching the devastating war in Ukraine. It may represent the limit of what Washington and Moscow can agree on at this point.

"Will this become a step towards other negotiations? It won't – why would it? It's a specific case, a specific negotiation, a specific result, wrote Fyodor Lukyanov, the editor-in-chief of Russia in Global Affairs. "Nothing personal, an ice war." *Observer*

ANDREW ROTH IS THE GUARDIAN'S MOSCOW CORRESPONDENT



▼ Brittney Griner, left, in Moscow earlier this year; Viktor Bout in court in Bangkok in 2010

YURI KOCHETKOV/EPA; DAMIR ŠAGOLJ/REUTERS



ANALYSIS
CHINA

Sharp pain
About-turn on Covid policy will take toll on aged population

By *Emma Graham-Harrison*

Beijing's abrupt dismantling of zero-Covid controls has been welcomed by economists, even as the country braces itself for the human impact of letting the disease spread through a vulnerable population.

The leadership's U-turn on how it handles the pandemic appears to have been triggered by protests against controls that began last month, a nationwide show of discontent on a scale China had not seen in decades.

That unrest came after growing concern about the toll that isolation and regular harsh lockdowns were having on the economy.

China has been an engine for regional growth since last century. However this year it is forecast to lag behind its neighbours for the first time since 1990, with disastrous implications for its people.

Nearly one in five young people in cities are unemployed. Small and medium businesses have been particularly badly hit by the uncertainty, and the impact of unpredictable and lasting shutdowns of entire cities.

Almost no one has been exempt. The founder of Foxconn, a key Apple supplier, had warned Beijing that controls threatened China's place in the global supply chain, the Wall Street Journal reported.

The IMF's managing director, Kristalina Georgieva, welcomed the "decisive" steps by Chinese authorities in "recalibrating Covid policies", and said they could boost the regional international economy.

"This can be very good for the Chinese people and economy, and also good for Asia and the world economy," she said after a summit in China's eastern Huangshan city.

Georgieva also called for more vaccination and a quick expansion of options for medical treatment, to prepare for the wave of infections that will inevitably come.

The big challenge facing the leadership is whether it can limit case numbers and deaths. China is an ageing country, with vaccination rates lagging far behind what is needed to limit severe illness. Only 40% of people aged over 80 have received booster shots. Almost all of them will have had the domestically developed vaccine, which is less effective and long-lasting than western alternatives.

China has been seeking the technology to produce mRNA vaccines, but has declined to buy or import them. Adding to the risks from a fast-spreading wave of cases, there is almost no natural immunity, because most people have never been exposed to Covid.

Up to 2.1 million lives could be at risk, a study by health analytics company Airfinity found. It based models on an outbreak this year in Hong Kong, which also has an elderly population and low vaccination take-up.

Allowing the disease to spread when other respiratory diseases are circulating and people are crammed indoors, adds to the risks.

Those factors could mean a bumpy road ahead for China.
Observer

EMMA GRAHAM-HARRISON IS A SENIOR INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENT FOR THE GUARDIAN AND OBSERVER

INFECTIOUS DISEASES

Fears over triple hit of respiratory viruses

Combination of RSV, flu and Covid is causing a heightened threat to children's health in Europe and the Americas

By *Linda Geddes*

Before Covid, few people had heard of respiratory syncytial virus. Increasingly, though, this common cause of pneumonia and bronchiolitis (airway inflammation) is filling up hospital beds.

In its latest report, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) said several countries had experienced unusually early increases in detections of RSV, with rising paediatric hospital admissions in France, Ireland, Spain, Sweden and the US.

▶ The US is experiencing surge in respiratory illness
XINHUA/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

▼ A child with RSV receives treatment in Germany, where cases have been on the rise
HEIKO BECKER/REUTERS



"With the continued impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the circulation and health impact of other respiratory pathogens, it is challenging to predict how the new winter period will develop," a joint statement by the ECDC, European Commission and World Health Organization said.

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) issued a similar statement last month, as the virus burdens healthcare systems across Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Uruguay, and the US, with children and infants under the age of one particularly affected. "The rise of a single respiratory infection is a cause for concern. When two or three start impacting a population concurrently, this should put us all on alert," said the PAHO director, Dr Carissa F Etienne.

A "tripledemic" of Covid, RSV and flu is bad news for adult hospital wards: even in a normal year, an estimated 60,000 to 120,000 older adults are hospitalised and 6,000 to 10,000 of them die from RSV in the US alone.

However, the bigger threat is to children's health. RSV usually causes mild cold-like symptoms but is a leading cause of pneumonia and bronchiolitis in infants. Worldwide, it is responsible for about 3.6 million hospital admissions and more than 100,000 deaths in under-fives each year.

Before the arrival of Covid, RSV followed a predictable pattern, with low rates during summer and a sharp increase in infections in winter. Paediatric wards would be stretched but could plan for these annual peaks.

However, since Covid restrictions were lifted, that ability has largely evaporated. For instance, between July 2021 and February 2022, the US experienced consistently high RSV infections, followed by more in July and August 2022. Now, they are soaring again, with RSV hospitalisation rates for newborns seven times higher than in 2018, the last full season before the pandemic.

In European countries, the usual pattern has been disrupted. "We had a system where if there was not enough capacity in the Netherlands, children would go to Germany or Belgium because those countries had already had their RSV season, or it was still to come," said Prof Louis Bont, a paediatric infectious diseases specialist at the Wilhelmina children's hospital in Utrecht, the Netherlands.

"Now, at the moment we are reaching our peak, Germany is also transferring children to the Netherlands. It seems that several neighbouring countries may have reached the peak of their epidemics at the same time."

Combined with influenza, and human metapneumovirus infections – another common respiratory virus that can cause breathing difficulties in young children – the coming weeks and months could be difficult.

"Usually, these viruses follow each other, so first you have one virus, then the other, then the other, but now they all seem to be coming at the same time," Bont said. "RSV is the most problematic but the pressure on paediatric wards, and in particular intensive care units, is really making it difficult to have enough capacity to take care of life-threateningly ill children."

600%
Increase in the rate of hospitalisation of newborn babies with respiratory syncytial virus since 2018

3.6m
Number of children with respiratory syncytial virus who are admitted to hospital each year worldwide





Last week, intensive care doctors in Germany reported paediatric units were stretched to breaking point after an increase in RSV cases and a shortage of nurses.

Sebastian Brenner, the head of the paediatric intensive care unit at University hospital, Dresden, told the German news channel n-tv: "If the forecasts are right, then things will get significantly more acute in the coming days and weeks."

Precisely why RSV is behaving in this way is unclear but a leading theory is that protective measures introduced during the pandemic, such as lockdowns and social distancing, interrupted RSV transmission, resulting in a cohort of young children who had never been exposed to it and developed any immunity.

In countries with less developed healthcare systems, unpredictable spikes in RSV could be deadly. Steve Cunningham, a professor of paediatric respiratory medicine at the University of Edinburgh, said: "In areas of east Africa, where there is a lot of famine concern at the moment, it wouldn't take much to cause a major outbreak of RSV."

Survival is not the only consideration. "Even when kids survive a bout with RSV, they can experience lasting effects," said Keith Klugman, the director of pneumonia at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Having a baby admitted to intensive care can also take a psychological toll. "Parents have said that, even a year afterwards, their family is not the same as it was before," Bont said.

The good news is that the current unusual situation is unlikely to continue for ever. There is also a raft of drugs and vaccines against RSV in late-stage clinical trials.

Even once RSV returns to its normal seasonal pattern, it remains the second largest killer of infants, behind malaria. So, if these drugs and vaccines are approved and funded, it would be a significant achievement. Until then, prevention remains the best strategy.

LINDA GEDDES IS THE GUARDIAN'S SCIENCE CORRESPONDENT



▲ The illegal road runs through Yanomami territory in northern Brazil
VALENTINA RICARDO/ GREENPEACE

BRAZIL

Gang attack Goldminers carve road in Amazon reserve

Aerial photos show largest Indigenous territory under threat from excavators smuggled into rainforest

By *Tom Phillips* YANOMAMI INDIGENOUS TERRITORY

The surveillance plane eased off the runway and banked west towards the frontline of one of Brazil's most dramatic environmental and humanitarian crises. Its objective: a clandestine 120km road that illegal mining mafias have carved out of the jungles of Brazil's largest Indigenous territory in recent months, in an audacious attempt to smuggle excavators into those supposedly protected lands.

"I call it the Road to Chaos," said Danicley de Aguiar, the Greenpeace environmentalist leading the reconnaissance mission over the immense Indigenous sanctuary near the border with Venezuela. He said such heavy machinery had never before been detected in the Yanomami territory, a sweep of mountains, rivers and forests in the north of Brazil's Amazon.

"We believe there are at least four excavators in there – and that takes mining in Yanomami territory to the next level, to a colossal level of destruction," the senior forest campaigner said.

The plane's cabin filled with excited chatter as the first glimpses of the clandestine artery came into view. "We found it, people!" the navigator said while the pilot performed manoeuvres over the canopy to get a clearer view of the dirt track.

"And *this* is the chaos," Aguiar said, pointing to a gaping hole in the rainforest where three yellow excavators had clawed a goldmine out of the banks of the coffee-coloured Catrimani River. In a nearby clearing, a fourth digger could be seen wrecking a territory, home to about 27,000 members of the Yanomami and Ye'kwana peoples, including several communities that do not have contact with the outside world.

Sônia Guajajara, a prominent Indigenous leader who was also on the plane, suspected the criminals had benefited from Brazil's recent presidential election to sneak their equipment in. "Everyone was focused on other things, and they took advantage," Guajajara said.

The arrival of excavators is the latest chapter in a half-century assault by powerful and politically connected mining gangs. Wildcat prospectors known as *garimpeiros* began flocking to Yanomami land in search of tin ore and gold in the 1970s and 80s, after the military dictatorship urged poor Brazilians to occupy a region it called "a land without men for men without land".

Huge fortunes were made – and often lost. But for the Yanomami it was a catastrophe. Lives and traditions were upended. Villages were decimated by influenza and measles epidemics. About 20% of the tribe died in just seven years, according to the rights group Survival International.

A global outcry saw tens of thousands of miners evicted in the early 1990s as part of a security operation. Under international pressure, Brazil's then president, Fernando Collor de Mello, created a 9.6m-hectare reserve. But by the next decade the *garimpeiros* were back due to soaring gold prices, lax enforcement and grinding poverty that ensured mining bosses a constant supply of exploitable workers.

The assault intensified after Jair Bolsonaro – a far-right populist who wants Indigenous lands opened to commercial development – was elected president in 2018, with the number of wildcat miners on Yanomami land reaching an estimated 25,000.

"It was a government of blood," said Júnior Hekurari Yanomami, a Yanomami leader who blamed Bolsonaro for emboldening the invaders with his anti-Indigenous rhetoric and for crippling Brazil's environmental and Indigenous protection agencies.

'Road to Chaos'
Miners are using the route to smuggle machinery into the protected territory



When Guardian journalist Dom Phillips, who was murdered in the Amazon last June, visited a mine in the Yanomami territory in late 2019, he found "a hand-operated industrial hell amid the wild tropical beauty": mud-caked miners using wooden scaffolding and high-pressure hoses to blast their way through the earth. Three years later, the situation has deteriorated further with the arrival of hydraulic excavators and the illegal road.

Alisson Marugal, a federal prosecutor tasked with protecting Yanomami lands, said the introduction of such machinery was a troubling development for communities already facing an acute "humanitarian tragedy".

Miners, some with suspected ties to drug factions, had brought sexual violence, malaria outbreaks and forced health posts to close, exposing children to "scandalous" levels of disease and malnutrition. Rivers were being poisoned with mercury by an illegal fleet of about 150 mining vessels.

Marugal said Brazil's underfunded environmental agency Ibama launched sporadic crackdowns, blowing up and torching illegal airstrips, helicopters and planes used to reach the territory. But the intermittence of such missions – and the huge economic rewards involved – meant they were only a temporary inconvenience.

Brazil's incoming president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, has pledged to put the *garimpeiros* out of business and slash deforestation, which has soared under Bolsonaro. "Both Brazil and the planet need the Amazon alive," Lula said in his first speech after narrowly defeating his rival in October's election.

Ibama already had a plan involving a relentless, six-month offensive that would have cut off the miners' supply lines and force them to flee the forest by starving them of fuel and food.

Aguiar argued that a militarised crackdown would not succeed unless it was accompanied by policies attacking the hardship on which environmental crime was built. "Overcoming poverty is an essential part of overcoming this economy of destruction," he said.

Hekurari Yanomami said: "These miners don't just carry spades and axes … They are armed and all of [their] bases have heavily armed security guards."

The price of inaction would be obliteration for a people who have inhabited the rainforest for thousands of years.

TOM PHILLIPS IS THE GUARDIAN'S LATIN AMERICA CORRESPONDENT

'Defeating poverty is essential to defeating this economy of ruination'

Danicley de Aguiar
Greenpaece

ANALYSIS
ARGENTINA

Up for appeal *Ex-president may stay out of jail but verdict upends politics*

By *Amy Booth* BUENOS AIRES

For decades, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner dominated Argentina's political landscape: as a senator, first lady, president and then vice-president. But last week she was sentenced to six years in prison in a verdict which, if upheld on appeal, will ban her from holding public office for the rest of her life.

Fernández de Kirchner immediately announced that she would not run for the presidency, or any other elected office, in 2023. The ruling appeared to have abruptly sidelined the country's most powerful – and polarising – politician since Juan and Eva Perón.

Because of her role as senator and vice-president, Fernández de Kirchner enjoys immunity from arrest and cannot be sent to jail until she has exhausted her appeals – a process that could take years.

The judges who found her guilty of defrauding the state will explain their decision at a hearing on 9 March. Fernández de Kirchner will then be able to appeal, at the federal criminal cassation chamber and then the supreme court.

María Esperanza Casullo, a professor of political science at Argentina's National University of Río Negro, said Fernández de Kirchner was unlikely to spend time behind bars. Argentinian prisoners can request to serve out sentences under house arrest when they turn 70. Fernández de Kirchner is 69.



Meanwhile, Fernández de Kirchner's announcement that she will not seek public office has implications for the electoral scenario. Argentina has general elections due in November 2023.

President Alberto Fernández (no relation to Fernández de Kirchner), served as chief of staff during the 2003-2007 presidency of Fernández de Kirchner's late husband, Néstor Kirchner, and the early days of the Cristina presidency, before breaking with her amid a dispute over agricultural export taxes.

It came as a surprise to many when Cristina announced that Alberto would be the presidential candidate and she his running mate in the 2019 elections, given the pair's differences and his less prominent political profile.

Amid a worsening economic landscape, divides have emerged in their Frente de Todos coalition over issues including a March deal to renegotiate a sovereign debt owed to the IMF. While Alberto has pursued a market-calming, conciliatory strategy, Cristina has pushed for a more hardline approach.

Fernández de Kirchner was president of Argentina between 2007 and 2015, after her husband Néstor left office. Argentina had growth rates of about 8% per year in the early 2000s, buoyed in part by high commodities prices, and the highest national minimum wage in Latin America. This enabled Kirchnerism to implement policies that favoured the poor, such as pensions for housewives, creating a universal child benefit and opening new public universities. But she had political tussles with agribusiness groups, the judiciary and the mass media.

"She embodied a spirit of redistributive policies … and confrontation with powerful sectors," Casullo said.

AMY BOOTH IS A JOURNALIST BASED IN BUENOS AIRES



Gas Street St Luke's is open to those in need of somewhere warm to sit
ANDREW FOX

UNITED KINGDOM

Warm spaces bring shelter from a cold economic climate

By *Jessica Murray*

It was about zero degrees celsius as families piled into Gas Street St Luke's church cafe, one of Birmingham city council's designated "warm spaces", to escape the December cold.

Staff said the cafe, just outside the city centre, had been busier than ever as winter weather set in and people are reluctant to turn on the heating at home because of rising costs.

"Being at home with the children, you're burning through gas and electric, so coming here, it's not just letting the kids have a play; we're saving so much money too," said 34-year-old Stacey, a mother of five, who visited the cafe after the afternoon school run.

Next to her was Charlene White, 42, who said she was especially feeling the strain as she tried to save for Christmas. "My daughter has diabetes and respiratory problems, so I have to have the heating on for her; I can't cut down. The staff are really understanding. They know why we've come in here," she said.

The cafe is run by Love Your Neighbour, a national network of churches and charities, and is open to everyone regardless of whether they are buying food, and staff can waive costs for people who are desperate.

"These days we're so busy, and kicking people out when we close is really horrible to do, especially when you hear a child say: 'Oh, it's cold at home,'" said Esther Rai, the head of Love My Neighbour in Birmingham. "It has such an impact on little ones. If they're huddled under a blanket, they're not playing."

For Linda Jay Jordan, being able to visit the centre gave her more support than easing financial pressure. "It's emotionally too, it's a feeling," she said, as her five-year-old daughter Trinity ran around playing. "While you're here you're not thinking about the bills. It's warm and welcoming. The atmosphere is lovely."

Her energy bills have gone from £80 ($100) to £132 a month. "Before discovering this place, I was living paycheck to paycheck and my mental health was atrocious. I feel like I've met my family here; I've come home," she said.

To respond to rising demand, there are dozens of warm spaces dotted around Birmingham in community centres, churches, leisure centres and libraries. All are open to the public and many provide free hot drinks and access to wider support, such as debt and benefit advice.

"The fact that we're doing this sort of crisis response is a really damning indictment of where we are as an economy and as a society," said Birmingham councillor John Cotton.

"I do fear that as the winter starts to intensify, we will see more people starting to struggle, more people in real fear about how they get through the winter. We've already seen evidence of that in the increase of people coming to advice surgeries and seeking help from the council," he said.

Over in Castle Vale, a large housing estate on the north-eastern outskirts of the city, Claudette Griffiths peeled off her gloves and asked staff to feel her cold hands as she arrived at the area's warm hub.

The 48-year-old, who is disabled and uses a wheelchair, had been at home in the cold before heading to the Spitfire Advice and Support Centre to warm up and have a free hot drink.

"I'm too scared to have the heating on much as I don't want my direct debit to go up, but I'm at home all the time," she said. "I sleep in the boxroom now because it's easier to keep warm in there."

She relies on government support to get by and is struggling to find work. "I'm basically living off my savings at the minute," she said. "What with the pandemic and cost of living, it's all come at once and we can't cope."

While the council has utilised a varied range of sites for warm spaces, everything from swimming pools to children's centres, the project has highlighted the lack of public spaces that can be turned over for this sort of purpose.

"This is an absolute indictment in the shortsightedness of austerity," Cotton said. "If you start to just cut away at services in the public realm, you remove a whole network of support that communities rely on."

JESSICA MURRAY IS THE GUARDIAN'S MIDLANDS CORRESPONDENT



'It has such an impact on little ones. If they're huddled under a blanket, they're not playing'

Esther Rai
Head of Love My Neighbour

Our charity appeal 2022 Help local communities to tackle cost of living crisis



By *Katharine Viner*

I have spent much of the past few months feeling furious, and I know many readers have too: a rage driven by the fact that in such a wealthy country there are so many children going to school hungry, so many families sitting freezing in the cold.

Right now, people in Britain are being forced to skip meals. They are too scared to switch on the heating. They can't afford to buy baby formula. One school told us about children "pretending to eat out of an empty lunchbox" because they did not qualify for free school meals and didn't want their friends to know there was no food at home. This is an emergency facing millions of people, many of whom have never been in this position before.

"I've got to buy new shoes for the kids soon. So I think: 'How many meals do I have to skip to afford that?'" we were told by Victoria, a single mother with two children. Her hunger, with its accompanying aches, pains, dizziness and quiet despair, was the price she paid to feed her family: "I trade my health for my kids' welfare," she said.

The emotional cost of deepening poverty is the creeping catastrophe of unaffordable rent; the dread of the bill on the doormat; the relentless blows to dignity, health and morale. People living and working on the frontline of poverty say they have never seen things so bad, or the hardship so deep, affecting many people working several jobs and those with disabilities and health problems.

All of this takes place as extreme wealth is running out of control; the number of billionaires has reached new levels and the richest half of society built up huge levels of savings during the pandemic. Meanwhile poor people face higher inflation than the rich.

The cost of living crisis is the theme of this year's annual Guardian and Observer charity appeal. We are supporting two fantastic UK charities, Citizens Advice and Locality. Both demonstrate how the practical response to poverty and inequality can be most powerful at a local level, where 12 years of austerity and the hollowing out of public services has meant the voluntary sector has become, in many places, the last line of defence against hunger and destitution.

A charity appeal may seem like a drop in the ocean in the face of such hardship. It is no substitute for better, fairer, kinder policies.

However, we see the appeal as a crucial flag of solidarity with those who suffer injustice, a call for a fairer society and recognition for those who step up to transform individual lives. Your donations will make a real difference.

Locality supports hundreds of grassroots community groups set up to tackle local issues. This could be unemployment, or the rescuing of local assets, such as parks and swimming pools. Increasingly, they are focusing on giving emergency help: food banks, warm rooms, debt advice, mental health support.

Citizens Advice offers free, confidential advice through its 250 independent local branches. It is facing record demand for its services, from distraught young families wondering how they will pay the bills, to isolated older people who are struggling to cope. It currently provides crisis support to two people every minute.

Locality's share of the money raised will support grassroots community groups across the country in the form of small grants. Citizens Advice will use its share to support general services and outreach work in some of the UK's most deprived neighbourhoods.

Guardian and Observer readers have collectively contributed more than £10m ($12m) to good causes via our annual appeal since 2015.

We recognise, of course, these are hard times for many of you - we hope we can still persuade you to give to the appeal.

KATHARINE VINER IS THE GUARDIAN'S EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

> *People living and working on the frontline of poverty say they have never seen things so bad, or the hardship so deep*

Donate at guardian.ctdonate.org

Scanning this QR code will also take you straight to the donations page. Unfortunately we are unable to accept cheques.



Volunteers are on the frontline against poverty

MATTHEW HORWOOD/ GETTY



◀ Workers collect turf from the Bog of Allen, west of Dublin
PAUL FAITH/AFP/GETTY



IRELAND

Turf's up
Peat burning on the rise as energy costs soar

By *Rory Carroll* and *Kate Connolly* BERLIN

This was supposed to be the year Ireland got serious about protecting its bogs but some of those hopes are wafting up in smoke as households burn peat to save on energy bills.

The soaring cost of oil and gas has reinvigorated the ancient practice of cutting and burning turf, a fuel that hurts the environment but can save a family thousands of euros, especially as temperatures drop to freezing.

The government introduced curbs to peat cutting this year to protect Ireland's bogs - which are important carbon sinks and sources of biodiversity - but Europe's energy crisis has boosted what is supposed to be an anachronism. It costs approximately €500 ($530) to heat a household with peat for a year versus several thousand euros for more climate-friendly sources of energy.

"People are glad to have turf. It's like having an oilwell in your own back yard," said Michael Fitzmaurice, an independent member of parliament.

Niall Ó Brolcháin, a researcher at the Insight Centre for Data Analytics at the National University of Ireland, said consumers faced a pinch point. "The financial factor is a much stronger motivation than saving the planet. People are facing an immediate crisis."

Meanwhile people across Europe are turning to solid fuels, with Germany experiencing a wave of thefts of trees and woodpiles in forests.

In Ireland, anecdotal evidence suggests there has been a sizeable increase in the use of turbary rights which allow people to cut peat, said Ó Brolcháin, a former mayor of Galway city. "There is plenty of evidence of people selling peat door to door."

People in rural areas traditionally cut peat sods in spring and burn them in winter. "Last year I drove around Connemara looking for piles of turf and it was hard to find them. This year it was really easy," Ó Brolcháin said.

Marc Ó Cathasaigh, a member of parliament with the Green party, which is part of the ruling coalition, also cited anecdotal evidence of increased turf cutting. Though hard to quantify, it represented a "step backwards", he said. "Our bogs are important for carbon sequestration, water management and biodiversity. They are much more valuable to us as bogs rather than as fuel."

Ó Cathasaigh said fuel allowances and energy credits had cushioned households but some still relied on peat, coal and wood, adding to chimney smoke. "Air quality affects health, one follows the other."

Ireland's rural inhabitants survived for centuries by draining bogs and using peat as fuel. A semi-state company, Bord na Móna, cut turf on an industrial scale. Attitudes began to change in the 1990s. Burning smoky fuels was banned in Dublin and, in 2018, Bord na Móna announced the phasing out of its commercial turf cutting. The government banned the sale of turf, smoky coal, and wet wood in shops or online in October.

But it allowed families living near remaining bogs to continue cutting turf for domestic use. Almost 14% of households do so, including 4% for whom it is a primary source of heating, according to an Environmental Protection Agency study.

The European Commission, meanwhile has threatened sanctions unless Ireland curbs peat cutting in special areas of conservation.

Fitzmaurice hopes families can continue cutting and burning turf, saying it bolsters Ireland's energy security. "If you have something in your own country you should use it rather than be bringing in something from Saudi Arabia or Canada."

John Dore, a spokesperson for the Kildare Turf Cutters Association, said he felt sorry for households facing big energy bills. "I wouldn't like to be a tight-budgeted person paying for oil and gas. It won't make any difference to me because I've got the turf."

People in Germany, meanwhile, have turned to wood. The Consortium of German Forest Owners Associations says more people are collecting wood - and that professional thieves are stealing it for firewood and building materials, with losses in recent months amounting to millions of euros.

In one case, criminals near Königs Wusterhausen, outside Berlin, cut down and removed 100 trees. Forest walkers have been urged to report suspicious activity. Some forest owners have put GPS devices on trees.

For some there is an upside: Germany's 21,000 chimney sweeps have reported a boom in business - a quadrupling in some areas - as householders install and rehabilitate fireplaces.

14%
Proportion of Irish households that use peat for heating, including 4% for whom it is a primary source of heating

RORY CARROLL IS THE GUARDIAN'S IRELAND CORRESPONDENT. KATE CONNOLLY IS THE GUARDIAN AND OBSERVER'S BERLIN CORRESPONDENT

SOUTH AFRICA

Storm clouds gather over Ramaphosa as ruling party meets

By *Jason Burke* JOHANNESBURG

A cavernous conference centre in Johannesburg has been prepared for the elective conference of the African National Congress (ANC) party, and the political forecasts are as bad as the meteorological ones.

The conference, which runs from 16-20 December, is a five-yearly event at which delegates will elect a new leader of the ANC – and so, as the party has been in power for 28 years, of South Africa too. In charge of both is Cyril Ramaphosa, an affable if currently embattled 70-year-old.

Until recently, Ramaphosa's re-election as head of the ANC was a foregone conclusion. In recent weeks, the president has been forced on to the defensive after a parliamentary inquiry reported that he might have committed gross misconduct and even criminal offences after the theft of cash worth between $580,000 and $5m from his private game ranch almost three years ago.

The allegations mean that Ramaphosa, a centrist reformer, is now fighting for his political life. He remains the most popular politician by some margin in South Africa, but this may not save him from the ANC's brutal internal factional struggles.

In Soweto, which now has a population of more than 1 million, the challenges are very evident. "We're OK … except for the constant electricity cuts, the dirty water and the fact that there are no jobs," joked Octavia Mashao, 35. Others talk of soaring crime rates, drugs and a collapsing healthcare system.

But what few deny is that life is still better than it was when Ramaphosa was a barefoot boy walking with his books to the local schools, or to the nearby Lutheran church with his parents, a policeman and housewife.

Local resident Magadelene Maranele remembers how tens of thousands of people were uprooted from their homes in and around Johannesburg by the apartheid regime and dumped on barely habitable land. A neighbour recalled life during the protests that saw bloody police crackdowns in the township in the 1970s.

Now, though cattle still graze down by the overflowing river and sprawling squatter camps cover any flat land, Soweto boasts a theatre, malls, car dealerships, a football stadium and a thriving tourist trade. Around the fashionable Vilakazi Street, once home to the late former president Nelson Mandela and archbishop Desmond Tutu, house prices have soared and SUVs sit proudly outside many homes.

This is the kind of growth that Ramaphosa, who began his political career as a labour activist but made a fortune in business in the 1990s after being passed over as successor to Mandela, would like to see across South Africa. His fortune of an estimated $500m has not hurt him as a politician.

"His wealth helps because … he is seen as someone who is so rich he has no interest in being corrupt," said Asanda Ngoasheng, a political analyst.

With the economy crippled by power cuts, corruption and crumbling infrastructure, there is little chance of Ramaphosa's ambition being fulfilled soon. The biggest single factor may be the vote at the elective conference.

"The conference is the most important election we have … even if Ramaphosa is not making major progress, the alternatives are very unpromising," said Anthony Butler, professor of political studies at Cape Town University.

The most serious challenger to Ramaphosa is Zweli Mkhize, a former health minister who resigned after being accused of embezzlement of public funds during the Covid pandemic and is closer to the left wing of the party.

"The ANC is likely to drop below 50% in 2024 for the first time in [general elections] and different leaders would have very different responses to that loss," Butler said. This raises the prospect of the party governing as part of a coalition – a first since the fall of the apartheid regime in 1994 – or even in opposition.

The main source for the allegations against Ramaphosa is a former intelligence chief known to be close to the former president Jacob Zuma, whose government collapsed in 2018 amid allegations of corruption, many later substantiated by a judicial inquiry.

Whatever happens at his party's conference, Ramaphosa will probably keep fighting. Though clearly tired and close to resigning earlier this month, he has mounted a fierce fightback and will still probably win a second term as leader of the ANC. *Observer*

JASON BURKE IS THE GUARDIAN'S AFRICA CORRESPONDENT

'He is seen as someone who is so rich that he has no interest in being corrupt'

Asanda Ngoasheng
Political analyst



▼ President Cyril Ramaphosa attends a rally
GIANLUIGI GUERCIA/AFP/GETTY

SOMALIA

It is the country's worst drought for 40 years, but declaring a food emergency would risk the loss of vital financial aid just as hopes of a peace deal are rising

By *Tracy McVeigh*
MOGADISHU AND GALKAYO

Fear of the F-word as hunger spreads



The number of new arrivals is high at the Degaan camp in Galkayo as drought conditions leave people with little option but to leave home
GARY CALTON

In Somalia, the word for famine is so little used that few people know it or its meaning; the word they use is simply *abaar* – drought. Now, as the fifth failed rainy season draws to a close, the drought is the country's worst in four decades.

For months now, UN and aid agencies have been predicting that famine would be announced any day, in October, in December, and now early next year. "Famine is at the door," said UN humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths in September.

But the F-word has become a point of political contention, and is deeply divisive in Somalia.

There is no argument that 7.8 million people are without enough food or that 1.3 million have had to leave their homes because of the drought and the conflict between al-Shabaab insurgents and the Somali army. Or that people are dying as a result.

President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, who was elected in May, has had Somali and African Union forces engaged in a determined offensive against al-Shabaab, the Salafi jihadist group. His government has been working to bring clan chiefs on side to halt the violence that strangles the country.

There is some optimism among Somalis that he has a good chance of achieving stability and there are already signs of a development strategy attracting investment into the capital, Mogadishu.

Last month, Mohamud talked of a "risk" in declaring famine, worried that the international aid community would skew the government's coordination capacity and see development money rerouted.

"Announcing or declaring a famine is a very difficult situation that does not affect the famine victims only but halts the development, changes the perspective on everything," he said.

Around the town of Galkayo, which is split between two regions –



Mudug to the north and Galmudug to the south – the population is rising steadily as a stream of families arrive at the 74 encampments for displaced people.

Drought turns people into wanderers, with little option but to leave dead animals and dried-up gardens behind to go in search of food and water. Conflict dramatically ratchets up that pressure to move, as fighting and killing envelop villages, and as al-Shabaab, which controls about 20% of the country, brings extortion and forced recruitment to communities.

In Galkayo, the rate of acute malnutrition among under-fives is 52%. The three markers for a declaration of famine in a region are for malnutrition to exceed 30%, for at least 20% of households to face extreme food shortages, and for two people in every 10,000 to die as a result of this every day.

In the town's South hospital, Nimo Hassar rests on the mattress next to her tiny baby, Abdikadir. Their single bed faces the open door and a light but welcome breeze breaks through the heat. Hassar and her husband sold their last two surviving goats a few days ago to raise the money to get a ride here, where doctors may save their baby's life. In Bud Bud, her village 150km away, Hassar has already cradled five children as they died.

"Before the drought, I could feed my children, now there is no food and the animals have been wiped out," she said. This is not "normal drought", she added. "The 2011 drought was bad but this is worse."

The gathering of data on deaths and malnutrition levels is down to the UN's Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit-Somalia. A famine declaration carries no binding obligations, but serves to focus global attention on the problem. The UN wants that attention for Somalia, in the hope of driving up funding for the drought response for the region, which is only 50% funded.

But many in Mohamud's government worry that being overrun by international actors, even those who want to save lives, will mean a loss of autonomy and bring political destabilisation, fearing that the money coming into Somalia to help development could be diverted to emergency programmes that both skew where people move to, and give the militias a new target.

Foreign interventions can come at a cost to a government trying to combat an insurgency from "the second biggest employer in Somalia", as one UN observer said wryly.

If they cannot regain the land controlled by al-Shabaab, people in those occupied areas will probably starve. In 2011, al-Shabaab did not let aid in or allow people out.

"The UN want to declare a 'pocket' of famine but it is still a projection. Whether the data is real or whether the threshold has been met, the UN says we will not grab any attention unless we declare. They don't want to wait to miss the end of the fifth rains. But there is no guarantee any financing will be there either way," said Abdirahman Abdishakur Warsame, the presidential envoy for Somalia's drought response.

He says Somalia's challenges deserve international attention especially for a drought induced by a climate crisis it did nothing to cause. "We are trying to defeat an ideology, but climate causes conflict – people are fighting over water, over grass, the shortage of resources that creates this ideology is made worse by climate change."

However, he said: "The Somali government has a responsibility to protect their citizens, so if the data is there then the government has to declare. That is my position, if people are dying of hunger then we need international help."

But while the F-word sparks anxiety in Somalia over the implications, camps and hospitals deal with the reality of people like Nimo Hassar.

"I don't know if Abdikadir will make it or not," she said. "Allah gives and Allah takes away. What can I do?"

A few kilometres from the hospital, at Degaan, one of the 74 internally displaced people (IDP) camps that have sprung up on the flat dry plains around Galkayo, the Guardian saw mothers sharing a single sachet of their babies' Plumpy'nut peanut paste with older children who have nothing to eat.

"That happens all the time," said Dr Abdinur Abdullahi, who is working with a medical team at Degaan. "There is very bad malnutrition here. We're also seeing high rates of strokes too."

Three nights before, Nafiso Mohamed Osman arrived here from one of the IDP camps further south, near Somalia's capital.

"I came from Mogadishu due to the explosions and drought," she said. Like many women in the camp, her husband has gone and she has eight children. Some of the absent fathers are fighting, others have deserted families they can no longer support.

"I'm very scared and feeling nauseous from hunger," she said. "I know no one here and I didn't know before I came that there is no food here either, but at least there are no explosions. I wanted to keep the children safe."

In Mogadishu, presidential adviser Liban Obsiye says the current president is trying to repair Somalia's long history of bad governance while tackling the climate crisis and al-Shabaab, as the country faces "the biggest development and humanitarian risk".

"Some don't want famine declared because they think state resources will be diverted. That is not the case, but you can understand the worries – that future aid coming in will run riot over a complex country that needs sustainable solutions," he said. "No one wants to return to old NGO-run policies dictated by their foreign donors and the Somalia voice is missed."

TRACY MCVEIGH IS THE GUARDIAN'S GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT EDITOR

Stark figures
The markers of famine

>30%
Proportion of the population suffering from malnutrition

20%
Percentage of households facing extreme food shortages

2
Number of people in every 10,000 dying daily due to inadequate food consumption



ALCOHOL

What's your poison?





As the party season kicks in, so will the effects of having one too many. Here are the sobering facts behind hangovers and tactics that might help you avoid them

By *Katherine Latham*

The liver eliminates around one unit of alcohol an hour, then hangovers kick in. Vomiting is a survival tactic that has developed to eject harmful substances from the body

'Alcohol is a 'dirty drug'," says Emily Palmer, a researcher at Imperial College London, who studies hangovers. "It impacts multiple systems in the brain."

Scientists are not exactly sure what is going on in our bodies during a hangover, but they do know it is caused by a variety of biochemical and neurochemical changes. "It doesn't just affect the liver or the brain," says Palmer, "it affects almost every organ."

This Christmas, many of us will be celebrating with a drink or two or three. So is it possible to get through the morning after the night before unscathed?

The slippery slope

"You have your first drink and a neurotransmitter called gamma-aminobutyric acid - or Gaba - is released in the brain," says Rayyan Zafar, a neuropsychopharmacologist at Imperial College London and researcher for the charity Drug Science.

"Gaba slows the brain," he continues. "It works on receptors in the cortex, specifically parts involved in the thinking processes and control."

Gaba reduces a nerve cell's ability to send and receive chemical messages throughout the central nervous system. So, for the first one to three drinks, as Gaba is released you feel relaxed, says Zafar.

At the same time, you get a rush of dopamine. "You feel good, you feel relaxed, and you want more," says Zafar. But as you continue to drink, the alcohol binds to glutamate receptors in the brain - which are important for memory formation. Their electrical activity is suppressed, "essentially blocking the formation of memories", says Zafar.

The alcohol moves from your cortex, which controls behaviour, to the cerebellum, which is in charge of movement, motor coordination and balance. Next, alcohol intoxication hits the medulla, right in the middle of the brain. It controls autonomic systems including heartbeat, breathing and blood pressure. "The brain just shuts down," says Zafar. "That's why people call alcohol a depressant; because it depresses the whole central nervous system."

Can I get drunk on low-alcohol beer?

"Probably not," reassures Zafar. "Say the average pint of beer is 5% alcohol,

you'd need to have 10 0.5% low-alcoholic beers to have the same effect as a pint. I don't think your body would be able to hold on to that much liquid."

The aftermath

The liver eliminates around one unit of alcohol an hour, then the hangover kicks in. Vomiting, explains Zafar, is an evolutionary survival tactic that has developed as a way of ejecting harmful substances from the body; perhaps a small comfort when your head is hanging over the toilet bowl.

Alcohol is metabolised by the enzyme alcohol dehydrogenase (ADH). As ADH breaks down the ethanol, it forms acetaldehyde, a poison and carcinogen.

When blood alcohol content reaches zero, hangover symptoms are usually at their worst, as at that point all of the alcohol has been converted to acetaldehyde, which changes the way DNA functions, says Zafar.

Alcohol damages mitochondrial DNA. Mitochondria are the energy-producing machines in our cells, and even slight damage can lead to toxicity in the brain.

"If you regularly drink enough to cause a hangover, we think that damage may build up," says Palmer, "resulting in cognitive decline and early memory loss."

Alcohol also suppresses the release of vasopressin, a hormone that tells the kidneys to retain fluid, so urination increases. The resulting dehydration can leave you feeling thirsty, tired and headachy.

"We think hydration is super-important," adds Zafar. "And by hydration, we don't just mean water. We also mean sodium, chloride and potassium."

When your body is damaged, your immune system is activated. It sends out inflammatory cells that attack bacteria or heal damaged tissue.

"When you drink alcohol, the gut signals that it has a poison inside it," says Zafar. "In response, your immune system ramps up to try to reverse the toxicity. This can lead to too much inflammation."

The body has turned on itself. The inflammatory response can cause nausea, vomiting, headache, confusion, mood changes, cognitive impairment, and learning and memory deficits. Regularly drinking to excess can also lead to chronic inflammation, which is linked to diabetes, cancer and heart disease.

Do hangovers get worse with age?

Metabolism is a word we might associate with digestion of food, but the term actually describes all the chemical processes that take place in the body. "As you get older, your metabolism slows, so it takes longer to recover," says Zafar.

Palmer suggests it may also be down to reduced tolerance due to less heavy drinking as we age, and changing our drink preferences.

"When we're younger, we might drink something like vodka tonics," she says. "Later, we might drink wine or whisky."

Congeners, found in darker drinks, are a byproduct of the fermentation process. They are complex organic molecules with toxic effects such as acetone, acetaldehyde, fusel oil, tannins and furfural. Whisky has been found to have 37 times the amount of congeners as vodka, and studies show that drinks with more congeners cause a worse hangover.

How can I prevent a hangover?

Drink less, obviously. If you do want to have a few drinks, however, there are some tactics that can help you avoid the hangover.

Pace yourself: Dilute alcohol by adding ice, soda, lemonade or other mixers. You'll consume alcohol more slowly so your body will have a greater chance to process alcohol and your blood alcohol peak won't be as high.

Choose your drinks: Avoid red wine or whisky as they contain more congeners than vodka or gin.

Eat eggs: Eggs, says Zafar, contain the amino acid cysteine, which slows the metabolism of alcohol.

Can I cure my hangover?

Unfortunately not. According to researchers from King's College London, there is no convincing evidence that any so-called hangover cures work.

Their recent review assessed clove extract, red ginseng, Korean pear juice and other supposed hangover cures, and concluded that there isn't enough high-quality evidence for any of them.

However, ibuprofen can help reduce inflammation, and rehydrating with isotonic drinks, such as sports drinks, can help replace lost fluid and ions and may give you some relief.

Are some people immune to hangovers?

Some people are able to rapidly make alcohol dehydrogenase to break down alcohol, and some people can't do it quite so quickly. It all depends on your genes.

"Those who are able to rapidly regulate this enzyme and break down alcohol … probably don't have hangovers," says Zafar. "But they are more likely to develop alcohol addiction, because they can drink more without the negative effects."

Restraint might be easier knowing the discomfort that follows. "We want to try to prevent the damage we're causing to our bodies," says Palmer, "rather than sticking a plaster on it."

KATHERINE LATHAM IS A JOURNALIST WHO WRITES ABOUT SCIENCE, NATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Pay the price
The cost of the night before

£1.4bn
Estimated cost ($1.7bn) of hangovers to the UK economy

$1.37
Cost of hangovers for each drink in the US in lost productivity

£20
Average amount spent in the UK on treating a hangover



Hangover symptoms are usually worst when blood alcohol content reaches zero. All of the alcohol has been converted to acetaldehyde, which changes the way DNA functions

◀ Some drinks are more likely to lead to hangovers than others
PAUL HARDING/PA

'Alcohol doesn't just affect the liver or brain, it affects almost every organ'



◀ Rupert and Lachlan Murdoch. Both have been called in the suit by Dominion Voting Systems
DAVID PAUL MORRIS/GETTY

UNITED STATES

The lawsuit that may put Murdoch and Fox News out for the count

By *Chris McGreal*

Rupert Murdoch rarely has to answer for the alternative realities presented by his hugely profitable US cable network, Fox News.

Its conspiratorial claims of a parade of cover ups from the 2012 Benghazi attack to the climate crisis and Covid have been lapped up by Fox viewers and scorned by much of the rest of America, and then the world moved on. But this week, the 91-year-old billionaire media mogul was due to answer difficult questions under oath about the inner workings of Fox.

Dominion Voting Systems is suing the cable station and its Murdoch-owned parent company, Fox Corp, for $1.6bn over repeated claims that it rigged its voting machines as part of a conspiracy to steal the 2020 presidential election from Donald Trump.

The suit shines a spotlight on Fox News' part in promoting Trump's "stop the steal" campaign and its hand in driving the January 6 insurrection at the Capitol. But legal experts say that Dominion, which supplied voting machines to 28 states, appears to be building a wider case that Fox News has a long history of misinformation and steamrolling facts that do not fit its editorial line.

Over the past few months, Dominion's lawyers have been working their way up the tree of Fox News producers, executives and presenters with interrogations under oath about the network's work culture and its weeks of conspiratorial, and at times outlandish, claims about Trump's defeat. Last Monday, lawyers deposed Murdoch's eldest son, presumed successor and Fox Corp CEO, Lachlan.

Now, Dominion has reached the top of the tree. Months of accumulated testimony were expected to put Murdoch, the chair of Fox Corp, in the difficult position of either having to deny he has control over what happens at his most influential US news operation or defend its campaign to promote the biggest lie in US electoral history.

Murdoch is already grappling with the costly legacy of phone hacking by British newspapers the News of the World and the Sun. His UK company has paid more than $1.2bn over the past decade to keep the gruesome details from being heard in open court with no end in sight after a high court judge earlier this year refused to prevent the filing of new claims.

When Murdoch was called to give evidence to a UK parliamentary hearing in 2011 about News of the World hacking the phones of a murdered schoolgirl as well as hundreds of politicians, celebrities and other public figures, he said it was the most humble day of his life. He also claimed to have known nothing about the wrongdoing and said he had been misled.

"I feel that people I trusted … let me down and I think they behaved disgracefully," he told parliament. "And it's time for them to pay."

But he can make no such claim about Fox News, where its misrepresentations were on full display.

The trouble started on election night after Fox called the key swing state of Arizona for Joe Biden. The call drew Trump's ire and unleashed a backlash against the network from his supporters.

At that point, Fox News CEO Suzanne Scott warned against bowing to pressure to embrace an alternate reality and reverse the Arizona call. "We can't give the crazies an inch," she said, according to court records.

As it turned out, "the crazies" took a mile, as Fox News put a parade of Trump lawyers, advisers and apologists front and centre over the following weeks to promote myriad conspiracy theories about how the election was stolen from Trump, including by rigging the voting machines.

Alongside them, some of Fox's biggest names took up the cry of fraud.

Lawyers have obtained numerous internal messages that are "evidence that Fox knew the lies it was broadcasting about Dominion were false" and part of a culture of politically loaded reporting and broadcasts.

Dominion claims that without Fox, "these fictions" about electoral fraud would not have gained such traction.

So far the only Fox employees to pay a price for the debacle are those who got it right. Weeks after the election, the network fired its political director, Chris Stirewalt, who had refused to back down from calling Arizona for Biden. The Washington managing editor, Bill Sammon, who supported Stirewalt's decision, took retirement.

Fox argues that Sean Hannity and the other presenters are protected by journalistic privilege, but that position has been complicated by the Fox host's own description of his role.

Hannity has more than once said he is not a journalist but a talk show host, and so does not have to adhere to the profession's ethical standards.

CHRIS MCGREAL IS A WRITER FOR GUARDIAN US

Vote down
A big swing against Fox?

28
Number of states that used Dominion Voting Systems machines in the 2020 election

$1.6bn
Sum for which Dominion is suing Fox News and its Murdoch-owned parent company, Fox Corp

$1.2bn
Amount that Murdoch's UK company has paid out over a phone-hacking scandal

MEXICO



Epidemic of violence rages on as anti-cartel strategy fails

By *Oscar Lopez* MEXICO CITY

The news came fast: a judge murdered in cold blood; cartel members attempting a prison break; five people killed at a bar in a popular port city. The surge in violence over a single weekend in Mexico brought headlines that are increasingly familiar as powerful gangs battle for control of the country: shootouts, cars set on fire, bodies lying in the street.

It has become a steady drumbeat of conflict that underscores the failure of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's security strategy – and the inability of his government to tackle the scourge.

"There's this false sense that we are moving away from a latent state of armed, violent, lethal conflict," said Falko Ernst, a Mexico security analyst at the International Crisis Group. "But we must be conscious that we're talking about a staggering level of homicides and other lethal practices that are still the norm in Mexico."

Despite campaigning on a promise to take the military off the streets, López Obrador, or Amlo as he's commonly known, has increasingly relied on the armed forces to tackle the violence, deploying the army and the national guard across the country.

Last Monday the Mexican president addressed the recent wave of attacks in Zacatecas state, where a day after a judge was shot dead, cars were set on fire and roads blocked off as inmates at a prison tried to escape.

"We are improving, we are advancing, we will not stop protecting the people," the president said during his morning news conference, before blaming the violence on the inaction of previous governments. But the very next day, the carnage continued.

Last Tuesday a shooting near a kindergarten in Sinaloa state left two dead; a video shared on social media showed children cowering under their desks as their teacher tried to comfort them.

Last Wednesday, another shootout between the military and members of an organised crime gang in the border city of Nuevo Laredo left seven people dead, a week after shootouts forced schools in the city to cancel classes.

Preliminary figures from the Mexican government show there have been an average of 78 murders a day this month in Mexico. Amlo has pointed to a slight drop in murders since he took office as a sign his strategy is working. Overall homicides dropped by about 7% in the first 10 months of 2022, compared with the same period last year, official figures show. But given that more than 26,000 Mexicans have been murdered this year, such a dip is hardly a victory, analysts say.

"We're still going to come out north of 30,000 homicides that have been officially counted by any standard this year," said Ernst. "We're still talking about this staggeringly high level."

Zacatecas state has become a focal point for the violence as powerful crime groups compete for the strategically significant region, with highways that head both towards the northern border and the Pacific coast.

Between 2015 and 2021, the number of murders in the state increased by a staggering 400%. In January this year, an SUV with 10 dead bodies was dumped in front of the offices of the state governor, David Monreal Ávila, in the state capital, also called Zacatecas.

"The issue of violence is terrifying," said Victor Piña, a lifelong resident of Zacatecas state who lives in the city of Fresnillo. "The situation is out of control." Recently, as reports emerged of violence erupting in the city after the failed prison break, Piña sheltered at home with his son, listening to the sirens that have become a common soundtrack in this city.

Zacatecas has become a focus for Amlo's chief security strategy, with the government announcing in November last year that it would be sending about 4,000 members of the military and national guard to tackle organised crime in the state. But more than a year later, with violence again overwhelming the state, the limits of the president's strategy has been laid bare, according to analysts.

"It's another example of the failed policy of military deployment," said Catalina Pérez Correa, a law professor at Mexico City's Cide university. "There are areas of the country that are simply out of state control."

And as the strategy of militarisation fails, residents like Piña are left to deal with unending violence. "I love my home profoundly," he said. "And I see that it's going through the worst crisis in its history."

OSCAR LOPEZ IS A JOURNALIST BASED IN MEXICO

▼ Soldiers and national guard troops have been deployed across Mexico
JOEBETH TERRIQUEZ/EPA

'There are areas of the country that are simply out of state control'

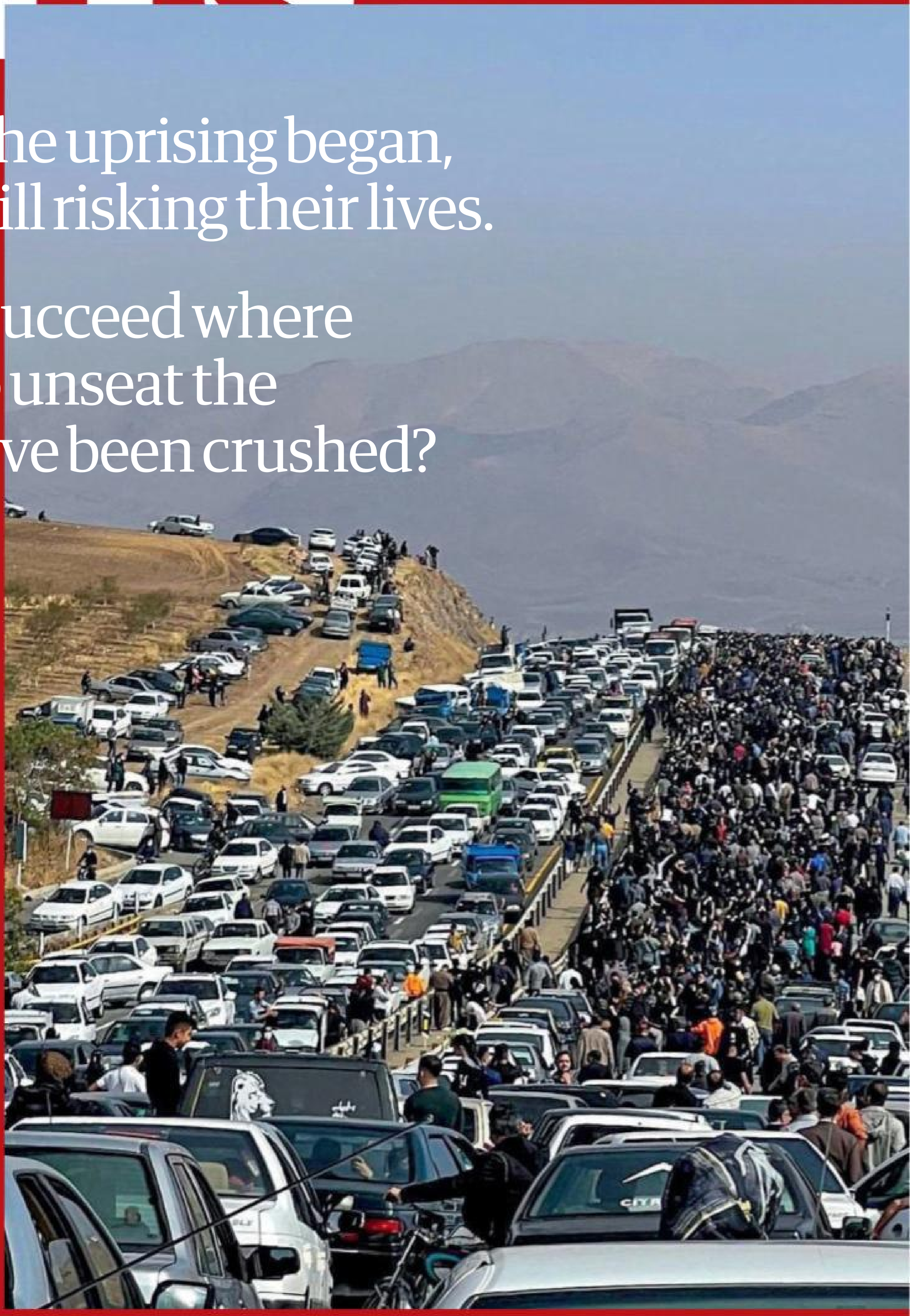
Catalina Pérez Correa
Law professor



Iran's

Three months after the uprising began, demonstrators are still risking their lives.

Will this generation succeed where previous attempts to unseat the Islamic hardliners have been crushed?



In clear sight
An unveiled woman at a protest in Saqez, western Iran, in October
UGC/AFP/GETTY

of

moment



truth

By Christopher de Bellaigue

FOR THE PAST THREE MONTHS, revolutionary sentiment has been coursing through the cities and towns of the Persian plateau. The agitation was triggered by the death of Mahsa Amini, a young Kurdish woman, on 16 September after she was arrested by the morality police in Tehran. From the outset the movement had a feminist character, but it has also united citizens of different classes and ethnicities around a shared desire to see the back of the Islamic Republic. Iran has known numerous protest movements over the past decade and a half, and the nation's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has comfortably suppressed each one with a combination of severity and deft exploitation of divisions within the opposition. This time, however, the resilience and unity shown by the regime's opponents have consigned the old pattern of episodic unrest to the past. Iran has entered a period of rolling protest in which the Islamic Republic must defend itself against wave upon wave of public anger.

In their retaliation against the protesters, the security forces have killed at least 448 people, including 60 children and 29 women, and made up to 17,000 arrests. Thirty-six protesters have been charged with capital crimes, according to Hadi Ghaemi of the New York-based Center for Human Rights in Iran, including several people accused of killing members of the security forces. Still, the authorities insist that they have erred on the side of restraint. On 9 November the commander of Iran's ground forces warned that Khamenei only needed to say the word and the opposition "flies" would "without question have no place left in the country".

Every day there are fresh demonstrations, whether in universities, in the streets or in cemeteries where the victims of police bullets and truncheons are buried. And whenever a protester is killed, you can be sure that in another 40 days, when the Shia mourning period climaxes, there will be a graveside protest and the possibility of more deaths, extending the cycle of savagery and reaction. It was this cycle – of deaths leading to funerals, protests and further deaths – that sapped the Shah's regime over the course of 1978 and culminated in his flight from Iran in January 1979.

This movement without a name, without a leader, is diverse and adaptable. It has harnessed a vast and hitherto underexploited resource – the latent dissatisfaction of women at their second-class status – and turned it into a mighty asset. And it has already scored a success, albeit a reversible one: for the first time since the early days of the revolution, significant numbers of women in cities across the country are going about their business without any form of hijab at all. On 4 December, Iran's public prosecutor announced that the morality police had been "suspended", suggesting that the authorities' policy, discernible since the beginning of the protests, of turning a blind eye to women not wearing the hijab has been made permanent. Sceptics on social media countered that the announcement is a government ploy to divide and weaken the opposition.

The movement's other novelty is its youthfulness. From older Iranians – the ones who stay at home worrying about their protesting children, or reluctantly accompany them, hoping to steer them out of harm's way – one often hears the phrase "the fear has evaporated".

Fear and caution are usually to be found among people who have something to lose, which cannot be said for Iran's young people, most in their late teens or 20s, who make up the bulk of the protesters. They have spent much of their lives watching inflation rise, the rial tank and their prospects of marriage, a flat and a car – Iranian society's trinity of success – recede. Emerging from lockdown, they have found that the world outside Iran's borders has become less accessible, while sanctions continue to inhibit growth and spending power, the authorities impede access to the internet, and more and more economic power accrues to regime figures and their families.

The movement began with the slogan "woman, life, freedom", and exhilarating protest videos spread online. In one, schoolgirls who had taken off their *maghnaehs*, a close-fitting head covering, chased a male official out of their school while pelting him with items of stationery. The movement's unofficial anthem was For, a lament by Shervin Hajipour, a honey-voiced young man from the north of the country; so dreamy, so full of sadness and yearning, it went around the world.

After three months of violence, the slogans have hardened. Now you're more likely to hear "I will kill him who kills my brother", while your Instagram feed brings up video guides to making molotov cocktails and footage of arson attacks on barracks of the Basij, the regime's volunteer militia. The darkening mood was captured by the popular rapper Toomaj Salehi shortly before his arrest at the end of October. Salehi's last music video as a free man shows him reading coffee grounds for a member of the ruling elite. "The bottom of your cup is … full of lies and hypocrisy," he raps. Borrowing a technique used by Iranian interrogators, he tells his interlocutor to write his confession, only this time "make sure it reaches the Supreme Leader".

Salehi is one of many celebrities who have thrown their support behind the protesters, including actresses who have abandoned the hijab, film directors who posted videos denouncing the crackdown and the country's best-known football commentator, who appeared before a crowd at his alma mater, Sharif University of Technology in Tehran, demanding freedom for all arrested students.

Salehi could have had no illusions about his fate once he started posting calls for his social media followers to protest, advising on tactics and beseeching the older generation to join their children on the streets. After Salehi's arrest, the authorities issued footage showing him blindfolded and expressing regret for his actions; his uncle popped up on social media declaring that the Salehi in the video was an impostor, the implication being that the real Salehi remains unbroken and unbowed. On 27 November a judiciary official announced that Salehi had been charged with the capital crime of "corruption on earth".

The courage of the young Iranians who face the security forces' guns and truncheons has won them admiration around the world. But the world's attention is fickle, and the regime has huge resources. The question is whether today's opponents of the Islamic Republic will have the numbers, staying power and tactical nous their predecessors lacked: in other words, whether this time will be different.

THE PROTESTERS' AVOWED AIM IS REGIME CHANGE, but in the Islamic Republic of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, they face a formidable foe. Khamenei's Iran is a state built on an idea – of a Shia cleric enacting God's will on earth – that has seen off communism and senses that capitalism is in terminal decline. This idea is on the march even now.

The regime has been emboldened by recent successes in its many-pronged struggle against the United States. In the past decade, Iranian arms, men and advice helped save Syria's president Bashar al-Assad, a key ally of the Islamic Republic, from an array of domestic and foreign enemies, including the US. By providing similar help to anti-US militias in Iraq, Iran contributed to President Joe Biden's decision to end the American combat mission in that country in 2021. It also makes the long-range missiles and supplies military drones Vladimir

This movement has harnessed the latent dissatisfaction of women at their second-class status



United front Iran football fans at a World Cup match last month
JOSÉ SENA GOULÃO/EPA

Putin is using to bomb Ukraine. All the while – and again in defiance of the US and its allies – the Islamic Republic has enriched enough weapons-grade uranium to be able to build a nuclear bomb, according to UN assessments of the country's stockpile.

After repeatedly outfoxing their vastly better-resourced rival, the US, the hardliners of the Islamic Republic exhibit a swaggering self-belief. In Ekbatan, a complex of residential towers in west Tehran, on the night of 31 October, that self-belief was chillingly evident. State security forces launched a punitive assault on protesters, driving them into their homes and then terrorising them with advanced gadgetry. Sound bombs produced tremendous booms that bounced off the buildings, rockets shot into the sky and laser pinpricks danced across the faces of the tall towers and into living rooms. High in one of the towers, a woman filming on her phone murmured: "They've turned the place we live in into a war zone."

While residents listened from their flats, an officer in one of Iran's security forces called into the night: "We give our blood for the nation, we give our lives for the nation, if need be, I swear to God, we'd cut the throats of our own women, our wives and children, but we'll not let our country come to harm." Footage that residents posted showed the lobby of one of the towers, its floors smeared with blood.

On the same night, in another Tehran housing complex that had seen protests, a group of men brandished truncheons and fired guns into the air while residents filmed them. "Unfortunately you're part of the 85 million," the officer in charge of this group called into his megaphone, by which he meant the 85 million people who live, for better or for worse, in Iran. He warned his audience that if they continued to protest, they would be dealt with more harshly than they had been to date. "You're not fighters," he said. "For us this is recreation."

The Islamic Republic has always used crises to galvanise the faithful and eliminate the faithless. In 1980, a year after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini toppled the pro-western monarchy of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, replacing it with clerical rule, Iran was invaded by Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which was backed by the US and its western European allies. The eight-year war that followed cost hundreds of thousands of Iranian lives, but the Islamic Republic survived the onslaught with its borders intact. Khomeini used the war to purge opponents and build a self-sufficient economy capable of withstanding the sanctions imposed after the US designated it a "state sponsor of terrorism" in 1984.

Iran's estrangement from the west is now all but complete. The west won't buy Iranian oil – or anything else. The country's young people have difficulty getting visas to travel abroad. The frustrations of isolation from the world have been compounded by official callousness and incompetence at home. On 8 January 2020, the Revolutionary Guard shot down an airliner full of Iranian civilians and took three days to own up to its mistake. In May this year, a tower block being built under government supervision collapsed with the loss of 41 lives. Both disasters led to protests on the streets, quickly suppressed.

Gradually since Khomeini's death in 1989, the unassuming Khamenei has quietly achieved absolute dominance over the country. He is a frail 83-year-old who has a loyal following among hardened regime supporters, whose numbers are impossible to ascertain but who are generally reckoned to amount to no more than 30% of the population. The protesters have a slogan that they want to "take back" their country. Khamenei's footsoldiers disagree. We are Iran, they say, not you.

Before these protests began, everyone was able to get behind the national football team. But this World Cup has shown that sport and politics have now merged. Before their opening group match against England, the players chose not to sing the national anthem. But this wasn't enough for protesters who have watched other sports stars risk their careers and their freedom to support the agitation. (It was too much for the authorities; the team dutifully sang the anthem before their remaining two group games.) These include a female climber who competed in an overseas competition without hijab, a table tennis player who has withdrawn from the national team in protest at the crackdown, and the country's best-loved retired football star, Ali Karimi, who keeps up a blizzard of anti-regime tweets from his current base of Dubai.

The team's elimination from the tournament was greeted with jubilation by many back in Iran, where one reveller was reportedly shot dead by the security forces for hooting his car horn in celebration.

Earlier in the tournament, the team's star striker, Mehdi Taremi, had refused to comment for the international press on the political situation, saying: "I am not a politician." But that is precisely what Iranians increasingly expect their heroes to be. Iran's footballers have long benefited from excessive adoration because they represent the nation at its most optimistic and unified. No longer: when the mood of the country is revolutionary, the whistles of the fans reminded them, no one can stay on the fence.

WHILE THE FOREIGN MEDIA has emphasised the protests' feminist character, the unrest that has unfolded across Iran is much more diverse. The majority of casualties have come in the Baloch region of the south-east and the Kurdish north-west. In Baloch areas, there are fewer female protesters; this is a rebellion by pious Sunni men against a Shia state that discriminates against them and regards them as a potential fifth column for Sunni extremism. In the Kurdish region, the protests are an extension of the Kurds' long and fruitless campaign for cultural rights and autonomy, if not outright independence. And now, with the increasingly military nature of the state's crackdown, the movement in Kurdish towns such as Bukan and Javanrud feels increasingly like an insurrection, with barricades erected by protesters and the Revolutionary Guards shooting dozens dead.

Wherever people have agitated, from Babol on the Caspian coast to Asaluyeh on the Persian Gulf, the protesters are the sharp end of a thicker wedge of opinion. It is this body of uncommitted Iranians who will determine the movement's fate. Having reported on Iran since the 1990s, many times over the years I have heard Iranians who, while they have no affection for the Islamic Republic, express the fear that, should it fall, the country will disintegrate under pressure from ethnic separatism or become a failed state. The authorities are playing on this fear, with the pro-government media calling the nationwide protests a "political plot" ignited by separatist groups who want to split Iran. If there's one thing the regime and many of its critics agree on, it's the imperative of keeping the country whole.

For years the regime depicted its opponents as divided and lacking in credibility, and it was hard to disagree. Exiled groups such as the Mujahedin-e Khalq, a left-leaning personality cult

→



Brute force A police officer attempts to disperse demonstrators in September
AFP/GETTY

with few adherents inside Iran, squabbled with elderly monarchists gathered around Reza Pahlavi, the late Shah's US-based son, whose supporters long for him to occupy the throne his father left vacant. Meanwhile, ever since the revolution, armed Kurdish and Baloch groups have launched sporadic attacks on Iranian military targets, but the separatist and sectarian character of these groups have alienated them from the Shia Iranians who form the majority of the population.

In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, the government of an elected reformist president, Mohammad Khatami, who promised political liberalisation and better relations with the west, gave both young people and former revolutionary firebrands a chance to articulate demands for peaceful change. But the unelected hardline clerics, who sit above the elected government and have the last say on all important policy matters, wouldn't let Khatami realise his agenda - with two important consequences. Starting in 2005, when Khatami was replaced as president by hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran experienced a brain drain that relieved the regime of a generation of young professionals and students who might have gone on to form an effective internal opposition. At the same time, inside the country, discontent had nowhere to go but the streets.

Even though protests were growing in frequency, they didn't add up to an existential threat to the Islamic Republic because each one espoused a different cause and served a different constituency. A huge but peaceful movement arose in 2009 in response to a disputed election, but it was largely a genteel, middle-class affair; a warning from the supreme leader and some carefully calibrated brutality sufficed to subdue it. In November 2019, a steep rise in petrol prices brought unemployed working-class youths on to the streets, where they burned banks and hurled stones at riot police. The regime isn't squeamish about using live ammunition on minorities and the poor; hundreds were shot dead and the unrest ended.

It is demoralising to put your freedom and life on the line and get nowhere. To be outmanoeuvred and outgunned generates a sense of inferiority, of powerlessness, and it explains why many Iranians avoided politics and devoted their energies to getting by in a worsening economic climate or figuring out how to move abroad.

In the unlikely event that the regime suddenly crumbles, no one has the slightest idea what will come next

If the Iranian opposition has so far been divided and easily suppressed, this is where this movement marks a significant departure from its predecessors. Whether by instinct or consensus, the groups that are now pressing for the Islamic Republic's demise have gone out of their way to present a unified front.

Iranian Kurdish guerrilla groups based across the border in Iraqi Kurdistan have resisted the temptation to launch military strikes in Iran, which would be interpreted as a bid for territory. In Zahedan, the main Baloch city, the protesters shout patriotic slogans such as: "From Kurdistan to Zahedan, my life for Iran."

On 4 November, Mowlavi Abdulhamid Ismailzahi, the city's influential Friday prayer leader, called for a referendum to decide what kind of regime Iran should have. And with this audacious demand, which could easily lead to his arrest, Ismailzahi, a grey-bearded Sunni cleric, found himself pursuing the same goal as the late Shah's son, Reza Pahlavi, in exile in the US. Pahlavi's name has been chanted during some protests in Iran, mostly in working-class areas; it is impossible to know how much support a restoration of the monarchy might command. Pahlavi himself quoted the original Kurdish version of "Woman, Life, Freedom" at a recent press conference he gave in Washington DC.

ANOTHER THING THAT MAKES THIS MOVEMENT DIFFERENT from earlier ones is that Iranians outside the country - the post-2005 brain drain - have been tireless on the protesters' behalf. In a leaked recording of a meeting attended by intelligence officials in the central town of Yazd, and broadcast by BBC Persian, one of the officials was heard telling his colleagues that, of 92m social media posts generated in the aftermath of Mahsa Amini's death, 60% came from abroad.

Among the most prominent Iranian exiles is an Ontario-based dentist named Hamed Esmaeilion. In 2020, when the Revolutionary Guards shot down an airliner carrying Canadian-Iranians returning to Canada after visiting family in Iran, Esmaeilion's wife, Parisa Eghbalian, and their daughter, Reera, were among the victims. In the aftermath, Esmaeilion founded an association of victims' families that has, since the beginning of the unrest, organised anti-regime demonstrations around the world. The biggest of these took place in Berlin on 22 October, when 80,000 Iranian expatriates demanded the abolition of the Islamic Republic. Esmaeilion and other prominent exiles, including Masih Alinejad, one of three Iranian activists to be received by Emmanuel Macron on 11 October, have demanded that the US and its European allies break off the negotiations that have been going on intermittently since 2003 aimed at limiting Iran's nuclear development in return for lifting of sanctions.

There is a critical difference of perspective between those who continue to live in Iran and those outside. For impatient exiles, a nuclear deal and the lifting of sanctions would constitute a lifeline for the Islamic Republic - an outcome they would find unacceptable. For Iranians living in that Islamic Republic, it would mean an improvement in living conditions that have, in recent years, become all but unbearable. As yet, calls for a national strike to include the bazaars, teachers and - crucially - oil workers have gone largely unheeded. This cannot be attributed to government intimidation alone. It's also down to pay and allowance rises the government has showered on public sector workers and poor families in recent months. And to the fact that, for all the heroism of the protesters, in the unlikely event that the regime suddenly crumbles, no one has the slightest idea what will come next.

According to a report compiled by the regime and made public on 25 November by hackers calling themselves Black Reward, 51% of Iranians want the hijab to be a matter of personal choice and 56% expect the protests to carry on. But to what end? An opposition

without clear leadership has the advantage that it cannot be decapitated. But such is the diversity of this opposition, any discussion of a post-Islamic Republic Iran would imperil the unity that has been so painstakingly constructed. Among today's revolutionaries, anyone who raises the question "what next?" is likely to be shushed with phrases like "now's not the time for such discussions" and "anything is better than this lot", or even accused of complicity with the Islamic Republic's tactic of spreading fear that if the regime falls, chaos will follow.

The opposition's worst nightmare is that the regime will drive a wedge between them. And the Islamic Republic is in a class of its own when it comes to fomenting suspicion and paranoia. But paranoia and suspicion can rebound, as a recent snippet of film surreptitiously taken on a phone in a girls' school in the southern city of Shiraz demonstrates. In this film, an exchange is going on between the girls in the class and their teacher. There is fury in the voices of the children and consternation in that of the teacher, a middle-aged woman in the regulation dark blue maghnaeh. Her pupils are convinced that Iran's security forces were behind an attack on the tomb of a revered Shia figure in Shiraz on 26 October, in which 15 people were killed. The teacher is getting more and more distressed as she tries and fails to convince them that they are mistaken.

"My dear," the teacher addresses one girl through the uproar, "whose influence are [the perpetrators] under? They are under the influence of the Isis people and the Zionists." The children go wild with indignation. One of them yells: "False!"

Nudging her *maghnaeh* up her forehead, the teacher insists, "As God is my witness, our forces didn't do it; I swear it." A girl shrieks: "How do you know?" The teacher replies: "I know what I'm saying – on my children's lives, Isis claimed responsibility that very night."

It would make no sense for the Iranians to shoot up the tomb of their own Shia saint, and Islamic State has claimed responsibility. But conspiracy theories have a long and successful history in Iran. In the summer of 1978, the doors of a packed Cinema Rex in the Iranian refinery town of Abadan were locked and the building was burned to the ground, killing at least 370 people. The Shah's secret police weren't responsible for this atrocity, but at the time many Iranians thought they were; the burning of the cinema did more than any other single event to turn the people against their sovereign.

Now, egged on by opposition TV stations abroad, it seems a sizeable number of Iranians believe their government attacked the shrine to spread fear of a breakdown in law and order. In a statement announcing the arrest of 26 foreigners in connection with the attack (citizens of Tajikistan, Azerbaijan and Afghanistan), the intelligence ministry rubbished these allegations – a sure sign it is worried about them.

"They say you shouldn't try and understand the 80s generation," Ezzatollah Zarghami, the country's culture minister, recently told an audience of loyalist students – referring to the Iranian calendar decade the 1380s, in which many of the protesters, now in their late teens or early 20s, were born. Zarghami used to be the head of the state broadcasting corporation, a propaganda machine whose specialities include airing the confessions of dissidents who have been broken under extreme pressure. "I spoke to the chief interrogator of many of the recent detainees," Zarghami said, "and this person said to me, 'I've spent a lifetime interrogating people, and this was the hardest session I've ever had, because I don't understand what they're saying and they don't understand what I'm saying.'"

Not that the country's problems, he continued, are anything to worry about. "Our biggest problems are on questions of procedure and method, we don't have any problems on the fundamentals," he declared. With this reference to "procedure", Zarghami was criticising the heavy-handed implementation of the hijab law that led to the death of Mahsa Amini. What he was not doing was questioning the law itself.

Early in the protests, Zarghami received a visit from Bahman Farmanara, an urbane and elderly film-maker whose life and career, spent mainly in the west, suggest he has no affection for the Islamic Republic. Farmanara came to Zarghami seeking a permit for a film he wanted to make. Zarghami tweeted a photo of the meeting, which led to Farmanara being severely criticised online: the opposition was outraged that he was sucking up to a government that was killing people on the streets. That Zarghami was able to trash in a moment a reputation built over half a century is illustration, if one were needed, of the Islamic Republic's uncanny instinct for the enemy's weak spot.

In recent weeks a slew of journalists, writers, actors and film directors have been arrested, while at the end of November the judiciary chief announced the release of 1,156 detainees apparently considered less influential. At least four death sentences have also been handed down to protesters for committing violence against the security forces or public property. There will be more. State TV will broadcast trials and confessions and the police will announce the discovery of caches of arms and the disruption of underground networks. Members of the police and paramilitary forces who are killed by protesters, as has happened already, will be given a martyr's send-off.

It is unlikely that the government's suspension of the morality police will lead to a change in the hijab law. Khamenei can live with the fact that large numbers of Iranian women are going around without the hijab, but he will never accept legislation legalising their effrontery, and, if conditions permit, he will force them to put it on again.

Zarghami's words about mutual incomprehension came back to me as I listened to Reza Pahlavi, son of the late Shah, disclaiming all political ambition and only wanting the best for the Iranian people. He spoke in a stiff and effortful Persian, as if putting on a suit of clothes that has gathered cobwebs while sitting in his wardrobe in the US these past 43 years. What, if anything, do he and the rapper Toomaj Salehi, who lacerates the regime in a sharpened street tongue, and is now in a cell somewhere, have in common? They and the imam of Zahedan, the students of Mashhad, the militant women of Kurdistan?

Beware of anyone, pro- or anti-government, who claims to have an answer to this question. The ability of the opposition to pull together is only beginning to be tested. But already we know that whatever happens in Iran over the next few months, something has changed, something fundamental ●

CHRISTOPHER DE BELLAIGUE IS A JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR WHO COVERS THE MIDDLE EAST AND SOUTH ASIA



Anti-Shah
A protest in Tehran in 1978 in the lead-up to the Islamic Revolution
AP

The company now known as Meta has spent $100bn on creating an immersive successor to

Where is



the traditional internet. But is its big gamble on virtual reality backfiring? *By Steve Rose*

everyone?

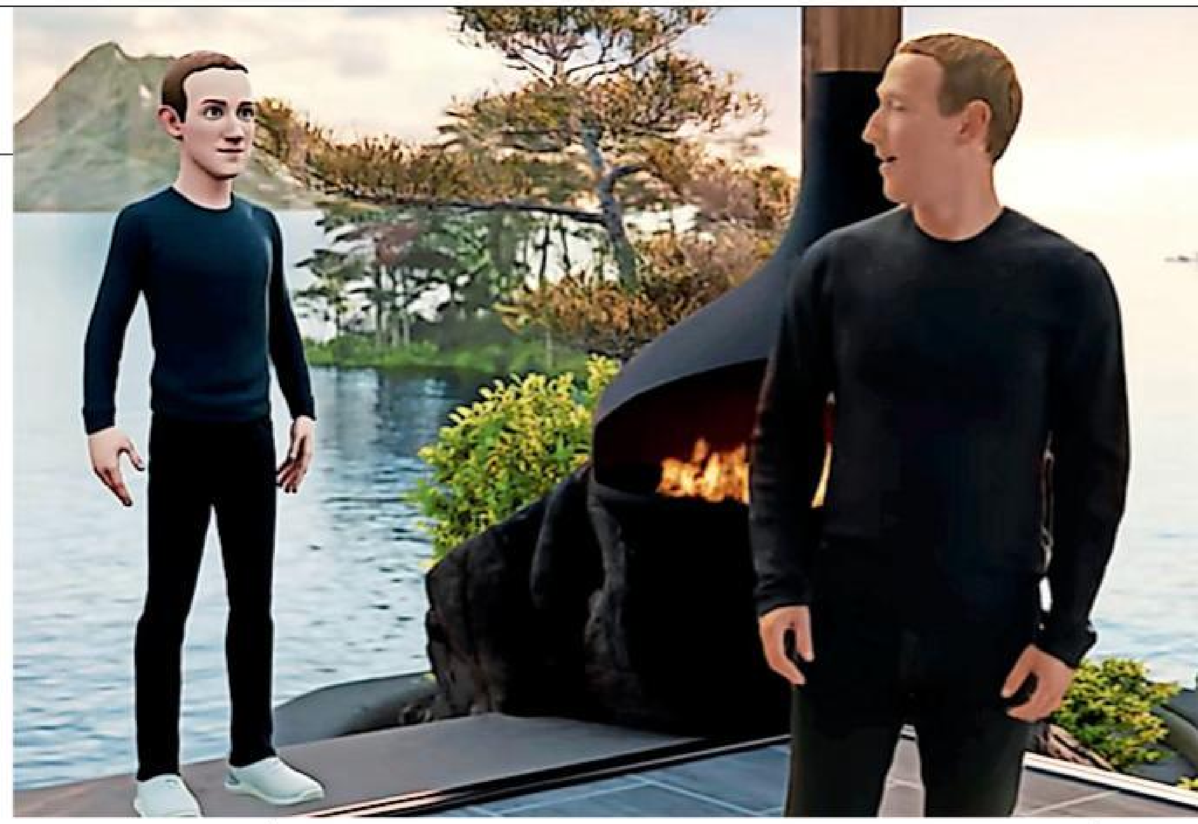
WHAT A DIFFERENCE A YEAR MAKES. Last October, Facebook supremo Mark Zuckerberg could barely wait to show the world what he was up to. "Today, we're going to talk about the metaverse," he enthused in a slick video presentation. "I want to share what we imagine is possible." Transitioning almost seamlessly from his real self into a computer-generated avatar, Zuckerberg guided us through his vision for the virtual-reality future: playing poker in space with your buddies; sharing cool stuff; having work meetings and birthday parties with people on the other side of the world; customising your avatar (the avatars had no legs, which was weird). Zuckerberg was so all-in on the metaverse, he even rechristened his company Meta.

This month, we saw a more subdued Zuckerberg on display: "I wanna say upfront that I take full responsibility for this decision," he told employees morosely. "This was ultimately my call and it was one of the hardest calls that I've had to make in the 18 years of running the company." Meta was laying off 11,000 people – 13% of its workforce. Poor third-quarter results had seen Meta's share price drop by 25%, wiping $80bn off the company's value. Reality Labs, Meta's metaverse division, had lost $3.7bn in the past three months, with worse expected to come. It wasn't all bad news, though: Zuckerberg announced last month that Meta avatars would at last be getting legs.

After decades of spectacular "move fast and break things" growth, Zuckerberg's empire is now looking a little fragile. Meta's share price has fallen by more than 70% this year. Moneyspinners Facebook and Instagram are losing market share and Gen Z users to fresher rivals like TikTok and Snapchat. Apple's changes to data privacy last year also decimated revenues – its introduction of an "ask not to track" option on iPhones has effectively starved Facebook of the lucrative data it uses to target ads.

Meanwhile, Meta has invested a staggering $100bn on metaverse research and development to date, $15bn in the past year alone – with apparently little to show for it. Zuckerberg's newfound metaverse obsession could be seen as a preemptive virtual land grab for what is generally agreed to be the future of the internet. It could also represent an attempted second act, for both the 38-year-old and his somewhat tarnished Facebook brand. But the markets seem to be saying "count us out", and according to reports, just 58% of Meta's own employees said they understood the company's metaverse vision. Comments on the latest lay-offs in an anonymous employee survey included, "the metaverse will be our slow death" and "Mark Zuckerberg will single-handedly kill a company with the metaverse".

If nothing else, Zuckerberg has popularised the term "metaverse", even if he didn't invent it, and definitions of what it means vary. Zuckerberg explained it as "an embodied internet where you're in the experience, not just looking at it". Rather than our current 2D, screen-based internet, in other words, the metaverse will be a 3D virtual space, accessed by either a VR headset or AR (augmented reality) glasses, which superimpose a layer of digital information on top of the visible world.



My meta half Mark Zuckerberg and his digital self in the metaverse
YOUTUBE/META

Matthew Ball, tech investor and author of The Metaverse: And How It Will Revolutionize Everything, defines the metaverse as "a massively scaled and interoperable network of real-time rendered 3D virtual worlds", with individual presence and continuity of data. He has to explain it less and less, he says: "A year ago, it was mostly 'what is the metaverse?' Questions now are a lot more practical: what will be here? When? For whom? How, and why?"

The "why" is a particularly good question when it comes to Meta. "You're going to be able to do almost anything you can imagine," said Zuckerberg in his intro video last year. "Get together with friends and family, work, learn, play, shop, create …"

At the time we were just coming out of the pandemic. Remote working, video calling and e-commerce had suddenly become the norm. "Many people predicted this would be a permanent acceleration that would continue even after the pandemic ended," Zuckerberg said in a recent staff email. "I did, too, so I made the decision to significantly increase our investments. Unfortunately, this did not play out the way I expected." Post-pandemic, it turned out people still preferred meeting face to face or on a video call to donning a clunky VR headset and dragging your legless avatar into a virtual meeting room.

It has been a similar story on the leisure side. Meta's Quest VR headsets are the market leader, but most buyers are not



Game on Meta's Quest VR headsets are the market leader, but only 200,000 are using its Horizon Worlds app
XINHUA/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

using them to flock to Meta's principal app, Horizon Worlds – which the company describes as "a synchronous social network where creators can build engaging worlds". Meta set a target of 500,000 Horizon Worlds users by the end of 2022; the current figure is nearer 200,000 – down from 300,000 in February, suggesting many visitors are not returning. It has been criticised for programming bugs, instability, rudimentary graphics and a general sense of boredom. From my own visits to Horizon Worlds, the 3D motion and audio were fine but the graphics were basic, often garish and textureless: a good two decades behind today's best video games. The feeling is of a sparsely attended trade fair.

Many of Horizon Worlds' activities felt more like demonstrations: in a perfunctory wild west town, you can shoot a virtual bottle in a virtual saloon with your virtual pistol (with unsatisfyingly lo-fi results) and ride a hobby horse (literally a virtual horse's head on a broomstick). At the Marvel superheroes world, you can try on various



"It turned out people still preferred meeting face to face over dragging your legless avatar into a virtual meeting room

costumes that enable you to fly or shoot lightning bolts, and that's about it. There were few people in either the social "hangout" areas or the "games" section, and most of the strangers I encountered seemed to be American children. One had the avatar and voice of a 10-year-old girl.

NOT EVEN THE PEOPLE MAKING HORIZON Worlds have embraced it. Memos leaked in October appeared to show the Meta vice-president, Vishal Shah, urging staff to use their own products more. "If we don't love it, how can we expect our users to love it?" Shah wrote. "Everyone in this organisation should make it their mission to fall in love with Horizon Worlds. You can't do that without using it. Get in there."

Meanwhile, direct competitors such as VRChat and Rec Room are thriving. "It's pretty clear they are offering something that Meta doesn't," says veteran games designer Raph Koster, namely better avatars, a wider choices of games and, critically, bigger crowds (Rec Room has an estimated three million monthly users). "Next to those, Meta looks relatively sterile and empty. There's just a lack of sufficient entertainment in there."

Screen tests
From left: Meta's Horizon Worlds; Fortnite; Minecraft; and VRChat

Horizon Worlds' numbers are dwarfed by those of online games (most of which are accessible with and without VR headsets). Fortnite attracts 250 million active players a month. Gaming platform Roblox has more than 200 million visitors a month and Minecraft 170 million (two-thirds of whom are under 16 – the exact demographic that is turning away from Facebook and other social media).

"Historically, we've seen that game worlds generally don't have any trouble attracting an audience," says Koster. This is not a revelation. "Bars with a jukebox or a pool table tend to do better than bars without anything. It doesn't change because you digitise the experience."

Unlike Meta, the games industry began with the "why?" It was building complex, popular virtual worlds – proto-metaverses – long before the idea caught Zuckerberg's eye. As such, it is well positioned for a slice of the metaverse pie. Epic Games, for example, whose Unreal game engine (think of it as the "brain" of the game; the software framework that builds the reality in real time) powers not only its bestselling Fortnite but hundreds of other games and applications, making it attractive to independent metaverse-builders.

In April, Sony and Lego invested $2bn in Epic's metaverse vision. In January, Microsoft moved to acquire another games giant, Activision Blizzard, makers of World of Warcraft, Overwatch, Call of Duty and Candy Crush, for nearly $70bn (the deal is currently under antitrust review).

Having sprung out of social networks like Facebook, Meta's model is based on "an attention economy, not a fulfilment economy", says Herman Narula, head of the British tech company Improbable. Social media prioritises keeping users passively engaged for as long as possible, whereas gaming seeks to provide fulfilling, active experiences.

"There's a difference between watching an experience and having an experience," he says. "If you look at games like Fortnite and Minecraft … what matters is presence; how many things can you do? In Minecraft, you can move anything about it, you can modify the laws, you can be creative. So what matters is creating a highly creative environment, which allows the normal self-expression."

Improbable's website claims "we are the metaverse technology company". Among other things (it works with military as well as gaming companies), the company, which Narula co-founded in 2012, is working on connecting various metaverses together, and hosting large numbers of people in virtual worlds. Whereas most multiplayer online games, like Fortnite, never really put more than 100 people together on one server, Improbable

→

has hosted events bringing together 30,000 people in the same virtual space. Unsurprisingly, Narula is optimistic about the metaverse. In his recent book Virtual Society, he writes: "Like the development of writing, or the advent of the computer age, the dawn of the metaverse will be a grand pivot point in the history of humanity."

THE METAVERSE WAS VALUED AT NEARLY $23bn last year and is expected to grow nearly 40% a year for the rest of the decade. As the Epic co-founder and CEO Tim Sweeney put it last year: "The next three years are going to be critical for all of the metaverse-aspiring companies like Epic, Roblox, Microsoft, Facebook [Meta]. It's kind of a race to get to a billion users. Whoever brings on a billion users first would be the presumed leader in setting the standards."

The building blocks of the metaverse are coming together, and Meta is working on many of them: hardware like VR and AR devices, data and network infrastructure, social platforms and interfaces, developer and creator ecosystems – all of which require skilled people (in Meta's recent 11,000-person cull, Reality Labs was relatively unscathed).

"We are creating a new category that requires significantly and abundantly more resources than it takes to create a single product or collection of products," says a Meta spokesperson. "It's misguided to categorise our long-term investment as a loss while we are within our initial phases of development."

From the outset, Zuckerberg said the metaverse would take five to 10 years to arrive, though some, such as Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, are saying it is here already. Matthew Ball agrees. "We have hundreds of millions interacting in 3D virtual worlds each day," he says, pointing to the likes of Roblox and Minecraft. But it goes beyond gaming: Ball points out that Johns Hopkins University hospital is now performing surgery with XR – as in "extended reality", VR and AR – devices and game engines, while Vancouver airport runs a 3D simulation, a "digital twin" of the airport, incorporating real-time information that can be used for training, optimisation, future planning, simulation and testing, and similarly Tesla cars are building a live simulation of San Francisco using Unreal. "The pieces are more mature than many give credit, but we've yet to develop the standards and systems to integrate them in the ways the internet is developed today," he says.

It is unlikely that Meta, or any other big tech company, will "own" the metaverse, says Ball. "We often misrepresent the control of big tech," he says, pointing out that the "Big Five" – Google, Apple, Meta, Amazon and Microsoft – together collect less than 10% of digital revenues, "although they exert disproportionate influence over the rest of the internet … It is likely that a similar outcome happens with the metaverse: a handful of vertically and horizontally integrated software and hardware giants amass the substantial share of users, data, revenue, devices, etc, and exert even greater influence. The metaverse is likely to grow big tech's reach, not shrink it."

If Meta does succeed in controlling a substantial slice of the metaverse, though, there are further, deeper concerns. The charge sheet against social media in general, and Facebook/Meta in particular, is extensive: disseminating and amplifying online disinformation and hate speech, unseen and undisclosed political influence, its impact on mental health, the collection and misuse of personal data.

"Whatever company owns the metaverse will have better information about crime, better surveillance, better everything than the government will," says Koster. He points out how much of our lives is already online: our personal records, our bank accounts, our friendships, our online movements. The metaverse will enable access to even more layers of data: "A lot of the folks who work on the hardware for AR glasses, for example, are concerned about the fact that the glasses can read biometrics off your iris, and that tells them an enormous amount about your medical state, your emotions moment to moment. Virtual worlds are panopticons. The more we digitise the world, that's the power we're handing over to whoever runs that metaverse."

Meta is taking pains to assuage such fears. "The metaverse is a collective project," says a spokesperson, "and how to responsibly manage the new types of data that companies may collect is exactly the kind of challenge that needs collaboration and discussion. It's not up to any one company to set the rules on this."

All agree regulation is needed, but judging by how the internet has been governed so far, the outlook is complicated – potentially liberating; potentially downright dystopian ●

STEVE ROSE IS AN ASSISTANT FEATURES EDITOR FOR THE GUARDIAN

> **"Whatever company owns the metaverse will have better surveillance, better everything than the government will**



Face time A projected image of Mark Zuckerberg in London accuses Meta of 'destroying Brazilian democracy' HOLLIE ADAMS/GETTY

NELS ABBEY

A Netflix lens to focus on racism

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Opinion



CLIMATE CRISIS

The US is a rogue state leading the world towards ecological collapse

George Monbiot

Illustration *Eleanor Shakespeare*

There are two extraordinary facts about the COP15 convention on biological diversity, whose members have been meeting in Montreal to discuss the global ecological crisis. The first is that, of the world's 198 states, 196 are party to it. The second is the identity of those that aren't. One is the Holy See (the Vatican). The other is the US.

This is one of several significant international treaties the US has refused to ratify. Among the others are crucial instruments such as the Rome statute on international crimes, the treaties banning cluster bombs and landmines, the convention on discrimination against women, the nuclear test ban treaty and the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities.

In some cases, it is one of only a small number to refuse: the others are generally either impoverished states with little administrative capacity or vicious dictatorships. The US is the only independent nation not to ratify the convention on the rights of the child. Perhaps this is because it is the only nation to sentence children to life imprisonment without parole, among many other brutal policies. While others play by the rules, the most powerful nation refuses. If this country were a person, we'd call it a psychopath. As it is not a person, we should call it what it is: a rogue state.

Through its undemocratic dominance of global governance, the US makes the rules, to a greater extent than any other state. It also does more than any other to prevent both their implementation and their enforcement. Its refusal to ratify treaties gives other nations an excuse to participate in name only.

The question that assails those who strive for a kinder world is always the same but endlessly surprising: how do we persuade others to care? The lack of interest in resolving our existential crises, expressed by the US Senate in particular, is not a passive exceptionalism. It is an active, proud and furious refusal to care about the lives of others. This refusal has become the motive force of the old-new politics sweeping the world. It appears to be driving a deadly, self-reinforcing political cycle.

Take the nitrogen crisis in the Netherlands. Scientists there have been warning since the 1980s that the excessive release of nitrogen compounds – primarily by agriculture – exceed the land and water's capacity to absorb them, killing rivers, polluting groundwater, damaging soil, wiping out wild plants and causing a severe but seldom discussed air pollution crisis. But successive governments could not be persuaded to care.

> *The lack of interest in resolving our existential crises is an active, proud and furious refusal to care about others' lives*

Their repeated failure to act on these warnings allowed the problem to mount until it reached catastrophic levels. In 2019, a ruling by the Dutch council of state that the pollution levels breached European law obliged the government to do suddenly what its predecessors had failed to do gradually: shut down some of the biggest sources of this pollution.

This has triggered a furious reaction from the industries most affected, primarily livestock farming. The farmers' protests have become a cause célèbre for the far right all over the world. Rightwing politicians claim the nitrogen crisis is being used as a pretext to seize land from farmers, in whom, they claim, true Dutch identity is vested, and hand it to asylum seekers and other immigrants, at the behest of "globalist" forces.

In other words, the issue has been co-opted by "great reset" and "great replacement" conspiracy theorists, who claim there are deliberate policies to replace local, white people with "other cultures". Some Dutch farmers have adopted these themes, spreading ever more extreme conspiracy fictions, which might have helped to fuel an escalation of violence.

These themes are a reworking of long-established tropes. The notion that farming represents a "rooted" and "authentic" national identity that must be defended from "cosmopolitan" and "alien" forces was a mainstay of European fascist thought in the first half of the 20th century. Never mind that nitrogen fertilisers are now imported from Russia and livestock feed from the US and Brazil, never mind that the model of intensive livestock farming is the same all over the world: Dutch produce is promoted as "local", sometimes even "sovereign", and said to be threatened by the forces of "globalism".

Thanks to such failures of care over many years, we are approaching multiple drastic decision points, at which governments must either implement changes in months that should have happened over decades, or watch crucial components of civic life collapse, including the most important component of all: a habitable planet. In either case, it's a cliff edge.

As we rush towards these precipices, we are likely to see an ever more violent refusal to care. For example, if we in the rich nations are to meet our twin duties of care and responsibility, we must accept more refugees, who will be driven from their homes by climate and ecological breakdown caused disproportionately by our economies. As this displacement crisis looms, it could trigger a new wave of reactive, far-right politics, furiously rejecting the obligations accumulated by our previous failures to act. In turn, a resurgence of far-right politics would cut off meaningful environmental action. In other words, we face the threat of a self-perpetuating escalation of collapse.

This is the spiral we must seek to break. With every missed opportunity – and the signs suggest the Montreal summit may be another grave disappointment – the scope for gentle action diminishes. We must counter the rise of indifference with an overt and conspicuous politics of care ●

❋ **George Monbiot** *is a Guardian columnist*

UNITED KINGDOM

Harry & Meghan offers a long-overdue chance to acknowledge racism

Nels Abbey



STARTRAKS PHOTO/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

Although it would be hard to reach this conclusion from reading any of the thousands of negative articles the couple have generated, when Prince Harry and Meghan Markle fell in love, the royal family – and Britain more broadly – was gifted manna from soft-power heaven.

As well as her vast, obvious qualities, Meghan also brought something less obvious: Blackness – a quality that could not have been more historically potent, given the circumstances.

Suddenly the royal family, the human embodiment of British history and tradition, went from white and medieval to modern and multicultural. It became more reflective of modern Britain than practically any establishment institution you could name.

"And we all lived happily ever after" is how stories like this are meant to end. Yet the first volume of Harry & Meghan, the Netflix documentary, revealed a very different conclusion (or continuation) to the modern fairytale. To many Black viewers, the key revelation was that Meghan's Blackness (perhaps coupled with her class) was so subtle that her own mother didn't consider it a necessity to arm her with the racial survival kit (ie "the talk"). Subtle as it may have been, Meghan's Blackness was apparently still too much for Britain.

Long before anyone had seen the documentary, and therefore long before it could name its Goliath, much of Britain's media had agreed that Harry & Meghan was a poisonous, "one-sided" freak show intent on tearing down the royal family. Plot twist: it turned out that much of the British media was the actual Goliath, and the royal family was what Harry was trying to protect and liberate.

Throughout the programme, Harry's pain, fury and disgust at the treatment of his family by some wings of the British media was evident. In the initial instalment, Harry, Meghan and archive footage of Princess Diana illustrated persistent press intrusion from cradle to casket. The historian Prof David Olusoga, a contributor to the documentary, landed the most important point in this regard: the British media, especially the tabloid media, is a white industry. This fact shapes its interpretation of events, its sense of importance and what may or may not be appropriate or indeed racist.

Response to the show crystallised this. Guardian columnist Afua Hirsch was widely condemned for labelling the Commonwealth "empire 2.0"in the show. Her sin was to "attack the Queen's proudest legacy".

The idea of "common wealth" would be a hard sell to any of the millions of Africans who are going to extreme lengths to flee the true legacy of colonialism – extreme poverty, low life expectancy and insecurity. But the white lens didn't view Hirsch's comments through the prism of the billions of Black and Brown victims of empire, but through the prism of what they decided would be the feelings of the Queen.

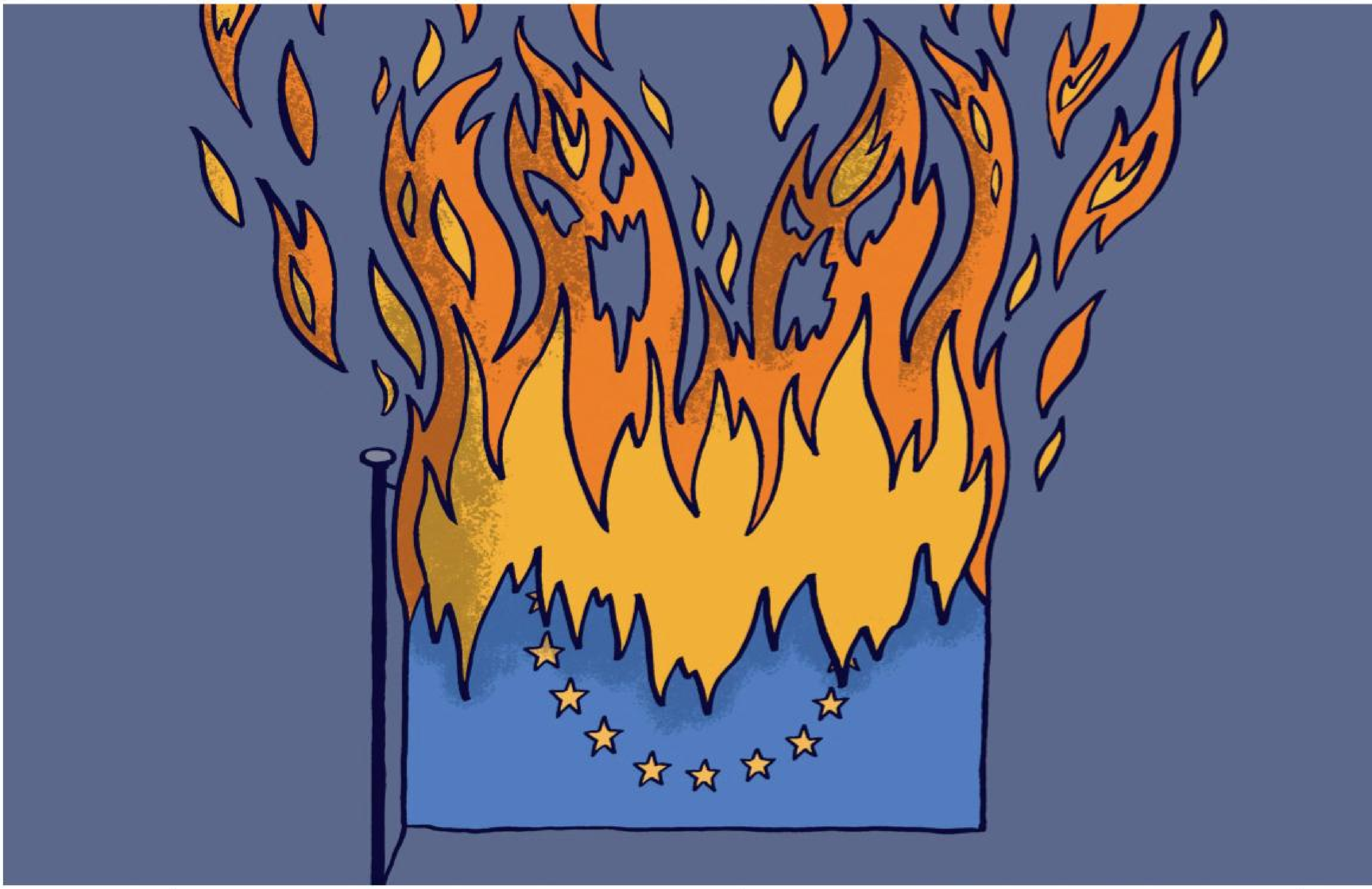
*✻ **Nels Abbey** is a broadcaster and author of the satirical book Think Like a White Man*

The white lens has played a significant role in how Harry & Meghan, the documentary and the living beings, are viewed. More broadly, it has played a central role in how Britain views itself, its place in the world and the people it has subjugated. Black Britons and other burden-bearers of historic great Britishness don't have the privilege to let the white lens do the heavy lifting of interpretation for us. As a result, as Britons of different ethnicities, we often view the same events very differently. Yet what is considered the official record of events remains the property of the white lens.

White mainstream Britain may not have known it, but Black people saw Meghan in some ways as a proxy for our own experiences. In the treatment she received, many saw a nation revealing its hand. And the new hand looked just like the old hand.

Whereas some will portray contributors to the documentary such as Olusoga, Hirsch and Kehinde Andrews as anti-British incendiary radicals, most Black people will see them as deradicalisers of a nation radicalised by the white lens.

From colonialism to slavery, given the central role Britain played in the cascading of racism around the world, Harry's involvement in this love and anti-racism story, and the documenting of it, is really important. He should be commended. He is doing more to enlighten and enhance our society than he would have achieved by staying as a working royal. As opposed to scuppering an opportunity to make progress on race, for once we may actually have blundered into making good on the opportunity. If only the tabloids could see it ●



UNITED KINGDOM

Let's agree that Brexit is a disaster and unite to repair the damage

Peter Hain

It's official. Brexit has caused lasting damage to the UK economy and, with the Tories in denial, Labour needs to lead the way with a new policy agenda. Yet it's almost a taboo topic: the Conservative government won't admit it is the case and Labour is understandably reluctant to rekindle old Brexit flames.

The governor of the Bank of England, the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development all agree that, notwithstanding Covid or the Ukrainian war, Brexit is the main reason why the UK is the only economy in the G7 still below its pre-pandemic size.

Real wages fell by 2.9% after Brexit, according to the Resolution Foundation. London School of Economics researchers found Brexit triggered food price rises of 6% in the two years to the end of 2021. Business investment, dogged by post-Brexit uncertainty, has also flatlined since 2016, compared with EU and US trends.

Since 2021, trade growth has been lower for the UK than the G7 average, reflecting non-tariff barriers after Boris Johnson's Brexit deal.

The OBR found trade was 15% lower than if the UK had remained in the EU. Tory leaders promised a new nirvana of foreign trade deals once the UK had "broken free" of the EU. Yet among the few new ones, Liz Truss's much trumpeted Japan deal has been accompanied by exports to Japan falling by £0.4bn ($0.5bn), or 3.2%.

Her deal with Australia has been denounced as "not actually a very good deal for the UK" by the pro-Brexit former cabinet minister George Eustice.

As for the promised "bonfire of red tape", Brexit has in fact piled up extra forms and costs for businesses attempting to access Britain's largest and nearest market. The chemical industry has spent £2bn complying with the UK's duplicate of the EU's regulatory system for absolutely no benefit, leading the Treasury to admit that the UK's Brexit divorce bill could rise to £42.5bn, up to £7.5bn higher than initially estimated.

Illustration *Dom Mckenzie*

This kind of nightmare will only be repeated for other sectors if the abominable "Brexit freedoms bill" ever reaches the statute book. This would, at the end of 2023, revoke about 3,800 EU measures, which were continued by Theresa May's administration to provide business with regulatory certainty after the referendum. The resulting chaos would also be incompatible with the requirement in Johnson's UK-EU trade and cooperation agreement to maintain a level playing field with the single market in order for the UK to retain tariff-free access.

Brexit has delivered chronic labour shortages and a dramatic jump in net migration in the year to June 2022, to a record 504,000 - deeply ironic given the racist undertone to much of the Brexit campaign.

As these Brexit failings become more evident, support for Scottish independence appears to be edging up. Unless Labour does something about it, we could get independence driven at least in part by Brexit, which Nicola Sturgeon continually stresses in making her case.

Brexit is proving a disaster and if re-running a referendum is out of the question, how do we "make Brexit work", to quote Keir Starmer?

Even if the real solution - rejoining the single market and customs union - is ruled out for the foreseeable future, there are practical steps that Labour as an incoming government should prioritise.

First, rebuild trust. Nobody at the top of the EU trusts the UK any more. And why should they, after the Tories sign treaties then break them? Yet without mutual trust, problem-solving negotiations will not succeed.

One task would be ironing out unnecessary travel restrictions (such as the "90 days limit in any 180 days" for UK citizens, whether on business or for tourism, to the Schengen area).

✻ **Lord Hain** *is a former Labour cabinet minister*

More urgent is sorting out the Northern Ireland protocol, which triggered a collapse in Stormont self-government. Having investigated the protocol as a member of a Lords committee for over a year, I know how that can be done, but it requires give and take on both sides, especially less fundamentalism and more straight dealing by the UK.

Building on the EU-UK trade agreement, we need to ensure continuation of a "level playing field" on regulation. Enabling, for example, Nissan Sunderland to continue exporting 70% of its production to Europe.

Cooperation on energy policy is essential, including on net zero and on security of supply (as we depend on imports from mainland Europe for around a third of our energy).

Britain faces a multiplicity of crises that can only be overcome in cooperation with our immediate European neighbours: catastrophic climate change, the Ukraine war, economic growth, energy affordability and security.

It's high time that we all confronted the Brexit fantasy of a "sovereign global Britain". The writing is on the wall. Our destiny lies, if not within, then certainly with Europe - and Labour needs practical policies to deliver that. Something, given the current prosperity-killing shambles, that even Brexit voters would surely welcome? ● *Observer*

The Guardian View

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Rightwing extremists will not be good for either Israel or the Palestinians

The crisis in the Holy Land is once again at "boiling point", with blood being spilled on both sides. Tor Wennesland, the UN's peace envoy, did not mince his words to the security council last week. The rising death toll in the West Bank, the worst since 2006, is roiling the waters. Since January, about 140 Palestinians have been killed in this territory, nearly all by Israeli forces. Palestinian attacks targeting Israelis have left 30 dead.

Days earlier, Mr Wennesland had been "horrified" by the fatal shooting of an unarmed Palestinian man during a scuffle with an Israeli border police officer. Yet rather than upbraiding the officer for a public execution, the incoming national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, from the far-right Jewish Power party, hailed him as a hero.

The Religious Zionism bloc, led by Mr Ben-Gvir and the Jewish supremacist Bezalel Smotrich, is now the third-largest group in the Knesset. Harbouring racists and homophobes, it was the big winner in last month's elections. The losers were Israeli democracy and the Palestinians.

Yaakov Katz, editor-in-chief of the Jerusalem Post, has good reason to call Mr Ben-Gvir "the modern Israeli version of an American white supremacist and a European fascist". Mr Ben-Gvir, who has been convicted of racist incitement and support for terrorism, has repeatedly pledged to relocate Bedouins and Palestinian Israeli citizens to neighbouring Arab states.

The proximate cause for violent extremists in Israel's government is Benjamin Netanyahu. On trial for corruption - charges that Mr Netanyahu denies - he seems willing to pay any price to end the cases against him. He seeks to ride the radical, rightwing wave surging through Jewish Israeli society.

Since 1967, the country has given itself plausible deniability over deepening an illegal occupation in the West Bank by claiming the region was under an apolitical, military-administered legal regime that respects international law. This, said Israel, was a temporary solution until a permanent deal was reached with the Palestinians. Putting Mr Smotrich's party in charge of the occupied territories threatens to expose this as a charade, confirming that Israeli occupation is a form of apartheid.

Mr Netanyahu appears to be betting the world will blink first. His friends in the Gulf are sticking by him. The Biden administration says it will judge the new government by its policies, not its personalities.

But the far-right march to their own drum. Mr Smotrich supports the annexation of the West Bank, the expansion of settlements and the demolition of Palestinian homes. Mr Ben-Gvir plans a provocative ministerial "visit" to Haram al-Sharif, site of the third-holiest shrine in Islam, under the pretence that Israeli Jews are struggling for their religious rights. If such words become deeds, then a Palestinian uprising - a third intifada - won't be far away. This is a dismal thought, but it seems to be where the unfortunate evolution of Israeli politics is heading ●



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Don't leave it to young to vote for action on climate

George Monbiot (Big story, 9 December) places the blame for the imminent devastation of our precious planet on our shortsighted, corrupt and plain stupid politicians, but how does this help those of us who desperately wish to do something to prevent this catastrophe?

Now approaching 85, I first became aware of the course on which we are heading in the late 1960s when I read Rachel Carson's Silent Spring.

Sixty years after this awareness began to grow, we still cynically elect politicians who can only see as far as their hip-pockets and their retirement packages. Wake up people – vote for candidates who can see through the vast conspiracy in which we are all embroiled. It's far too late to leave it to the disenchanted youth to make the change.
Noel Bird
Boreen Point, Queensland, Australia

What does it take to be considered British?

The problem with the question "where are you from?" (Opinion, 9 December) is not simple racism, it's an expression of a sense of superiority for being British. Even a white-skinned blond Scandinavian can be a target. I have lived in England most of my adult life. I have been married to an Englishman for nearly 40 years and a UK citizen for 25. The interrogation Ngozi Fulani suffered was painfully familiar.

My status of not belonging was brought home to me if I dared express an opinion on British politics. Even in ordinary conversation, my outsider status was emphasised. I did not want to pretend to be British by birth – just a permanent member of the community in which I lived. I can appreciate that it is far worse for people born in Britain; I am, after all, an immigrant.
Dr Kerstin Nyberg
Hoedspruit, South Africa

Claims over return to the moon are pie in the sky

The 2 December 2022 edition of the Guardian Weekly was terrific, covering the challenge of returning people to the moon, the issues of the climate crisis and biodiversity loss and the question of pronouns.

But am I the only one bemused by the claim that the challenge of sending humans back to the moon is the inspirational problem we must solve to be human? Surely our really challenging problem is to solve our diminishing biodiversity, not only to be human but, alongside other species, to survive?
PT Price
Ballarat, Victoria, Australia

Look to the depths for hidden threats to nature

Unfortunately the illustration for the article about the Cop15 biodiversity summit in Montreal (Feature, 2 December) shows only life above water. Considering the critical role of oceans in planetary life it would have been good to see an illustration of life below both freshwater and our oceans. One of the tragedies of the hidden nature of the latter is that its wonders are threatened by the push for deep seabed mining.
Wendy Flannery
Woolloongabba, QLD, Australia

How compulsory voting protects democracy

Polly Toynbee makes a valid point about the risks of UK election ID laws (Opinion, 2 December) and suggests requirements for ID be relaxed. She also suggests making voting compulsory for first-time voters.

In Australia, all citizens over 18 must cast a ballot, even if they choose to put a blank paper, or one decorated however they wish, into the ballot box.

If it is compulsory to "vote", it becomes illegal for anyone to impede this process.

We need only look at the US or Afghanistan as well as the UK to reflect on how different the outcome of elections might be.
Dr Juliet Flesch
Kew, Victoria, Australia

Tapping into the perils of rock'n'roll performance

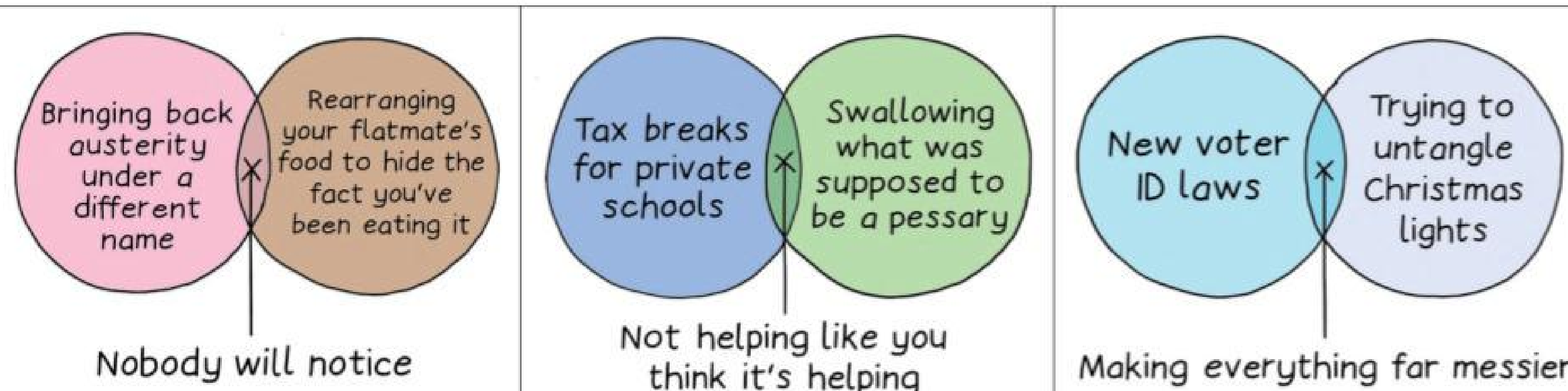
Tim Dowling's predicament of being lost backstage (Lifestyle, 9 December) mirrors that of Spinal Tap, who wander through a maze-like basement shouting "Rock'n'roll!" while above them the crowd resorts to a slow handclap and booing. At least he did not suffer the fate of any of their drummers.
Tim Jones
Hoylake, England, UK

CORRECTIONS

An interview with the photographer and activist Nan Goldin said "four out of five Americans who had been prescribed prescription painkillers were now using street heroin". That misrepresented a statistic published in 2016 by the American Society of Addiction Medicine that four in five new heroin users started out misusing prescription painkillers (Feature, 9 Dec).

The motoring journalist Sue Baker died at the age of 75, not 67 (Deaths, 25 Nov).

A WEEK IN VENN DIAGRAMS
Edith Pritchett





G
The best books of 2022
Cultur
SEASON OF GOOD READINGS
Illustrations by
JONNY WAN



Story tellers
From left: Saba Sams, George Saunders, NoViolet Bulawayo, Hanya Yanagihara and Shehan Karunatilaka

By *Justine Jordan*

FICTION

Impressive debuts, the return of familiar authors, wry delights and dazzling invention



Some of the year's biggest books were the most divisive. In her follow-up to A Little Life, **To Paradise**, Hanya Yanagihara split the critics with an epic if inconclusive saga of privilege and suffering in three alternative Americas: a genderqueered late 19th century, the Aids-blasted 1980s, and a totalitarian future degraded by waves of pandemics. I was impressed by its vast canvas and portrayal of individual psychic damage set against seismic historical change.

There were mixed reactions, too, to Cormac McCarthy's jet-black brace of novels **The Passenger** and **Stella Maris**, his first in 16 years; and to Ian McEwan's **Lessons**, seen as self-indulgent and richly humane. Setting the protagonist's life against the arc of postwar politics from the cold war to Brexit, it can be read as an indictment of the boomer generation who "ate all the cream".

Also asking how we got here is **Bournville** by Jonathan Coe. With his third novel in four years, Coe tracks the fortunes of a family through snapshots of communal experiences, from the Queen's coronation through the 1966 World Cup to pandemic lockdown, in a compassionate portrait of individual and national change.

Ali Smith's response to lockdown was typically playful and profound; **Companion Piece** sees the outside world impinge on one woman's isolation, in a novel about the importance of making connections. Jennifer Egan's **The Candy House** harnesses a near-future technological advance – the ability to upload and share memories – to reflect on concerns around surveillance with dazzling inventiveness.

Radical invention characterises Percival Everett's devastatingly absurdist **The Trees**: focusing on a string of gruesome murders in Mississippi, it weaponises horror, comedy and detective fiction. In her rambunctious satire of Robert Mugabe's fall, **Glory**, NoViolet Bulawayo braids the allegory of Animal Farm with an oral storytelling tradition decrying repression around the world. Selby Wynn Schwartz's **After Sappho** reclaims hidden lesbian stories by tumbling together biography, scholarship and poetic flights of fancy.

Other standout novels illuminating the past include Louise Kennedy's **Trespasses**, set in Northern Ireland during the 70s. Based around a dangerous affair between a young Catholic woman and an older Protestant man, it combines gorgeously direct prose with an incisive eye for social detail. Shehan Karunatilaka won the Booker prize with **The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida**, a blistering murder-mystery-cum-ghost-story set amid the carnage of Sri Lanka's civil war. Maggie O'Farrell's follow-up to Hamnet, **The Marriage Portrait**, is a glittering Renaissance fable of a girl caught up in Italian aristocratic intrigue, and Kate Atkinson is deliciously acerbic in **Shrines of Gaiety**, exposing the underbelly of London nightlife in the roaring 20s.

It was a good year for unhappy families. Charlotte Mendelson skewers narcissistic control in **The Exhibitionist**, a darkly witty portrait of an artist on the slide who has spent decades squashing the creative energies out of his wife and children. Rebecca Wait's **I'm Sorry You Feel That Way** is a funny story of sibling rivalry and difficult mothers. There are no laughs in Sarah Manguso's

RAMIN TALAIE; NYE LYN THO; SIAN DAVEY; SARAH LEE

£7k *Median annual earnings ($8,500) of professional UK authors, reported by the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society*

Very Cold People, an impressive account of how silence, snobbery and repression allow the poison of abuse to trickle down the decades.

Ross Raisin has quietly become one of Britain's most interesting novelists: **A Hunger** explores the conflict between ambition and duty as a chef takes on a caring role when her husband develops dementia. Namwali Serpell's second novel, **The Furrows**, brilliantly dramatises the psychic dislocations of grief over a lifetime through the story of a woman haunted by the memory of her younger brother. Douglas Stuart followed Booker winner Shuggie Bain with a tough and tender story of family dysfunction and first love in **Young Mungo**. And in **Amy & Lan** , set on a ramshackle farm commune, Sadie Jones gives us a child's-eye view of messy family interactions and the life-and-death drama of the natural world.

Three hard-hitting debut novels shone out. **An Olive Grove in Ends** by Moses McKenzie portrays a young Black man's struggle to define what success might look like in a Bristol neighbourhood in the grip of gentrification. Jon Ransom's **The Whale Tattoo**, focusing on a gay working-class man in watery rural Norfolk, is lyrical, atmospheric and brutal by turns. And Sheena Patel's **I'm a Fan** punctures the bubbles of social media in a fierce tale of obsession and power dynamics.

Set in the Pyrenees and giving voice to everything from mountains to storms, mushrooms to dogs, English-language debut **When I Sing, Mountains Dance** by Irene Solà (translated from Catalan by Mara Faye Lethem) is a playful, polyphonic triumph. **Vladimir** by Julia May Jonas, a provocative post-MeToo morality tale about a female professor's crush on a younger man, is sharp and deliciously readable.

Three notable debut short-story collections introduced fresh, contemporary new voices. Saba Sams's unsettling **Send Nudes** captures girls and young women on the brink of change; Jem Calder's **Reward System** smartly anatomises contemporary life in the relentless glare of the smartphone; and Gurnaik Johal's **We Move** delicately traces relationships and disconnections across a British-Punjabi community. Short-story virtuoso George Saunders returned with **Liberation Day**, tragicomic allegories of regular folk caught up in hells beyond their understanding.

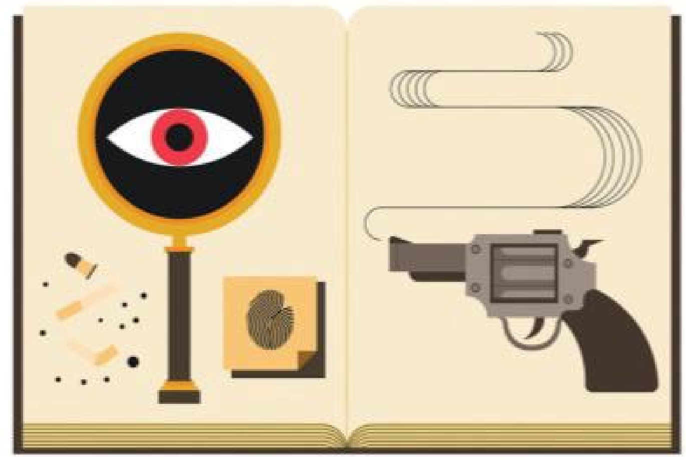
Emmanuel Carrère spins his fascinating web of social observation in **Yoga**, charting personal and psychic upheaval in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack. Yiyun Li's richly mysterious **The Book of Goose**, a tale of a passionate friendship between two peasant girls in postwar France, holds many layers of truth about art, love and self-creation. Lastly, a small miracle from another genre-hopper: in **Marigold and Rose**, Nobel-winning poet Louise Glück presents the first year in the life of twin girls. This wry, read-in-a-sitting delight channels the myriad possibilities of fiction with a huge sense of fun.

JUSTINE JORDAN IS THE GUARDIAN'S DEPUTY LITERARY EDITOR

By *Laura Wilson*

CRIME

Cosy escapes, dodgy cops, a murder told backwards and Frankie Boyle's funny and moving first novel





Given the relentlessly grim nature of the news, it's hardly surprising that escapist cosy crime continues to challenge traditional crime/thriller bestsellers, with Richard Osman's third Thursday Murder Club mystery, **The Bullet That Missed**, riding high in the charts. The past 12 months have seen a bumper crop of excellent books at the cosy end of the spectrum, from Ajay Chowdhury's second crime novel, **The Cook**, set against the backdrop of an east London curry house, to Canadian author Louise Penny's 18th Armand Gamache novel, **A World of Curiosities**.

Inventiveness appears to be on the rise. Janice Hallett's second novel, **The Twyford Code**, told in transcribed audio files retrieved from an iPhone, succeeds in being fiendishly clever and moving. Authors such as Gillian McAllister, whose **Wrong Place Wrong Time** is an ingeniously plotted murder mystery in which time travels backwards, and Gabino Iglesias, whose southern noir thriller **The Devil Takes You Home** has supernatural elements, are giving the genre a welcome shot in the arm.

The year has been punctuated by the collective groans of crime fiction critics as the results of yet another male celebrity's lockdown diversion landed on their doormats. The most impressive of these is Frankie Boyle's **Meantime**: set in Glasgow during the aftermath of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, it's funny and moving.

Standout non-celebrity debuts include Patrick Worrall's complex spy thriller **The Partisan** and **Wake**, Australian newcomer Shelley Burr's sensitive exploration of trauma in a parched outback town. And **The Maid** by Nita Prose will have you rooting for neurodivergent Molly as she finds herself caught up in a web of deception.

Recent revelations mean the British public's growing distrust of the police is part of the UK's permacrisis. Ian Rankin, creator of maverick cop John Rebus, commented recently that there are "big questions" for authors who write police procedurals. In his latest Rebus novel, the splendid **A Heart Full of Headstones**, an officer charged with domestic violence tries to make a deal by stitching up dodgy colleagues.

Translated crime fiction seems thinner on the ground, but the quality is high: including Olivier Norek's impressive **Breaking Point**, translated by Nick Caistor, and Antti Tuomainen's delightful **The Moose Paradox**, translated by David Hackston. The genre seems in good shape: a broader church, less formulaic and more exciting.

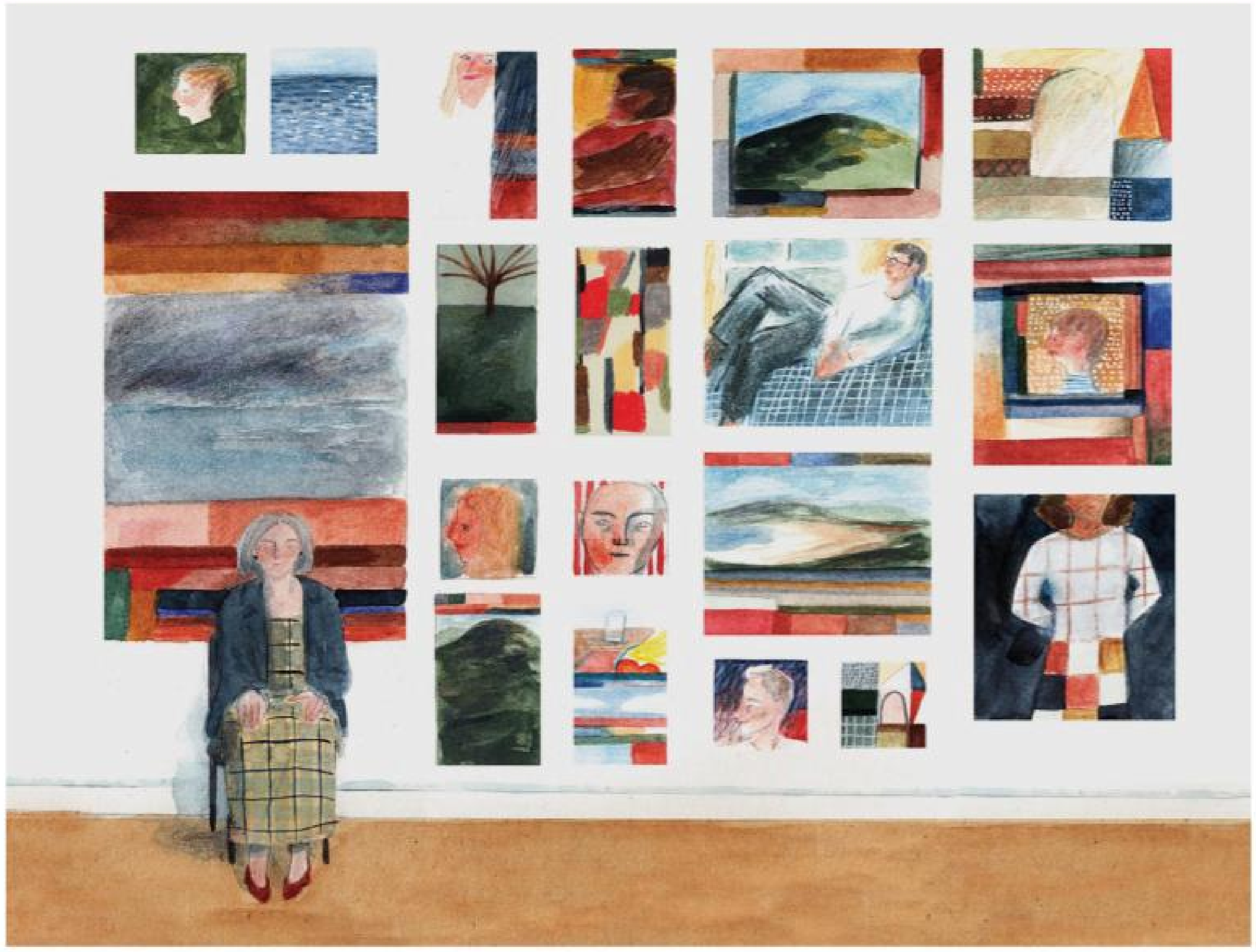
LAURA WILSON IS A BRITISH CRIME WRITER

1,648 *Number of book titles subject to US district bans in the 2021-2022 school year, according to Pen America*

By *James Smart*

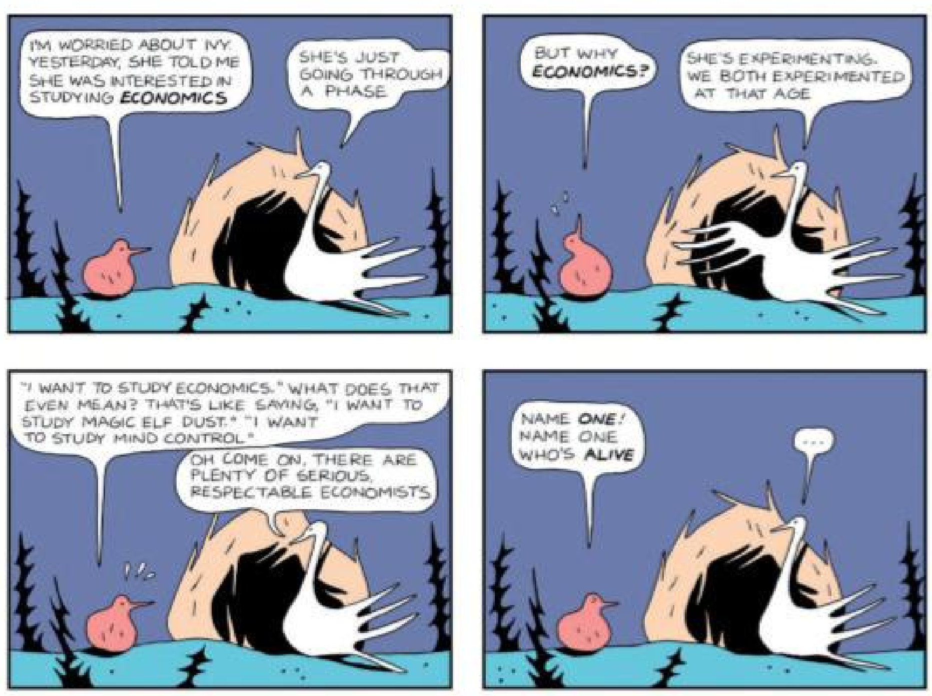
GRAPHIC NOVELS

A brilliant pandemic collaboration, an artist in the making and an avian society on the moon

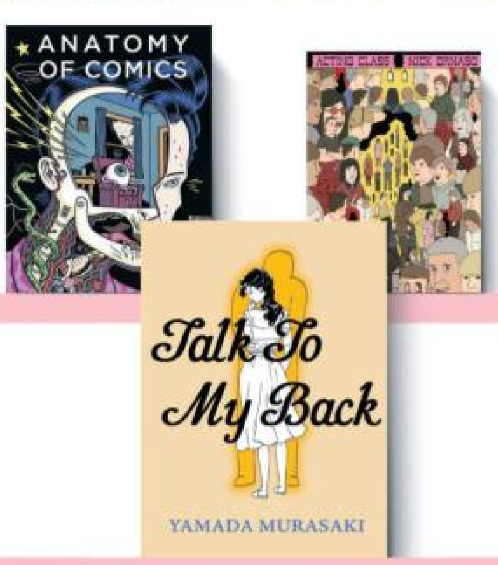








Life drawing Clockwise from top: Alison, Birds of Maine, Ducks and Oxygen Mask
LIZZY STEWART; DRAWN & QUARTERLY; KATE BEATON; FABER & FABER



One of the year's most gripping works focused on a family glued to the TV. **Oxygen Mask** charts a boy's panicked thoughts as the pandemic and George Floyd's death dominate the news. American YA writer Jason Reynolds lets his stream of consciousness unspool over three long sentences and 384 pages, while artist Jason Griffin shows blotches, bricks, buildings, masked faces and scenes of incarceration and apocalypse. It's a brilliant collaborative effort: you can inhale it at speed or linger over every startling page.

This year also saw two great full-length debuts from writers who had previously excelled with shorter work. In **Alison**, Lizzy Stewart uses sketches and prose to relay the life of a woman who falls for a self-regarding painter before finding her own way as an artist. This vivid and lyrical work is about friendship, possibility and the passing of time, but there's sharpness and anger here too, as well as real emotional clout.

Kate Beaton made her name with a playful comics series. **Ducks** is very different: a fierce and revealing memoir about Alberta's oil industry, which puts money in the pockets of workers and petrol in car tanks but leaves scars on the landscape of northern Canada and the people who staff its giant machines and equipment rigs.

Jim Woodring has been drawing surreal comics for 40 years, and **One Beautiful Spring Day** combines previous works with new material to produce a single sinuous epic. His wordless,

woodcut-style panels follow the adventures of a bucktoothed bipedal creature called Frank. Characters shrink, explode, eat each other and travel through space. This is a book with its own hypnotic vernacular, a psychedelic vision of perseverance, hedonism and rebirth.

Another Frank appears in Luke Healy's **The Con Artists**. When his friend Giorgio breaks his arm, Frank moves in with him, but their relationship feels the strain. Healy's bittersweet portrayal of a troubled friendship is full of finely observed detail and deadpan humour, but it's also a deeply felt exploration of happiness, trust and the lies we tell our friends and ourselves.

Nick Drnaso's eerie visions of American suburbia saw his previous work, Sabrina, become the first graphic novel to be longlisted for the Booker. In **Acting Class**, a drama group play out everyday scenes before progressing into ambitious scenarios involving sinister intruders, thuggish police and lonely boat trips. It's an ominous and compelling exploration of the imagination's darker side.

In Michael DeForge's **Birds of Maine**, he takes us to an advanced bird society that lives on the moon. Here cardinals, frigatebirds, owls, kiwis and penguins feed on the "universal worm" and browse an internet of terraformed fungus until a human astronaut crashlands in their midst. The surreal abstraction of DeForge's bright panels gradually reveals an intriguing world built with flair, love and attention to detail.

The five stories in Megan Kelso's **Who Will Make the Pancakes** showcase a wonderful range of topics and styles. A pregnancy is overshadowed by Watergate, a child is raised by cats and a camping trip turns sinister, while the artwork veers from black-and-white cartoons to perky watercolours in a sharp feast of observation.

The Joy of Quitting by Keiler Roberts skewers family life with merciless and very funny directness. But while the Chicago writer's latest memoir features plenty of domestic carnage, it also ranges wide, taking in email anxiety, spa etiquette and dolphin-riding monkeys to build a vivid life from scattered moments.

Yamada Murasaki's accounts of motherhood in **Talk to My Back** (translated by Ryan Holmberg) were first serialised in Japan in the early 1980s. This groundbreaking alternative manga moves through daily routines and moments of solitude as a woman wrangles her children, chafes at the limitations of the housewife's role and wonders where half her life has gone.

In his **Anatomy of Comics**, Damien MacDonald offers a gallop through the history of the form. Excerpts from early pioneers, popular icons and cult heroes sit alongside essays setting it all in context. There are plenty of gaps but it's a beautiful collection, with an intimate tone born of enthusiasm, and it offers enough fuel for a lifetime of comic-reading.

JAMES SMART IS A LONDON-BASED WRITER AND EDITOR

DAVID LOFTUS

By *Rachel Roddy*

FOOD

Tasty eulogies to snacks, growing up in a takeaway and the best of Indian and Jamaican cuisine



There is nothing cautious about **Cooking: Simply and Well, for One or Many** by Jeremy Lee. More stories, more illustrations, more wit, more advice, more recipes. The abundance feels contained, though, as does the gregarious, expert and tender writing, in an exquisitely well-crafted volume. This is the most complete collection of recipes, including a dish of potato, butter and cabbage called Rumbledethumps. It is also a biography; a meditation on ingredients and eating; and a celebration of food writers past and present. Lee notes that time spent in the kitchen is "something to cherish and celebrate". This book is, too.

"I was the kid you saw running behind the counter," says Angela Hui. Her memoir **Take Away: Stories from a Childhood Behind the Counter** is an exhilarating delight even when it isn't – for example, when she describes the racism that Chinese immigrants running a takeaway in the Welsh valleys inevitably faced. Her writing is full of humour and life, and nowhere more so than when recounting the complex dynamics of private family cooking. Recipes not only end each chapter, they tell stories, too, of longing and belonging.

I've been waiting for **Modern Pressure Cooking** with trepidation, because it meant getting a pressure cooker and I've been resisting for years. Fortunately, Catherine Phipps is not only an expert advocate, but utterly convincing. A book about something that cuts 70% from cooking times, using 70% less energy and considerably less water, is hard to ignore.

From the flicker of gas that opens the book to the ode to rum that finishes it, **West Winds: Recipes, History and Tales from Jamaica** is captivating. It is Riaz Phillips's second and it centres on a journey to Jamaica. Phillips is skilled, his writing evocative and sharp; I yearned for ackee, breadfruit, salt fish, spiced patties, red-pea soup, hardo bread and ginger beer, the latter two of which I made immediately.

Understanding and humour are good qualities in a book. **The Joy of Snacks** by Laura Goodman has an abundance of both. The premise is simple: snacks, whether a folded crisp, pickle, warm biscuit or cheeseball, are some of life's greatest pleasures. Deft storytelling ensures momentum, while deep research and real wisdom about how we actually eat flash brilliantly.

Inspired by a train journey between her parents' home towns of Kolkata and Chennai, **India Express** is a collection of 75 south Indian and Bengali recipes, and Rukmini Iyer's seventh book. The first thing I made from it was Chingri Macher Malai, spiced prawns in coconut milk, which took minutes to prep, simmered quietly for just under half an hour, and was perfect on buttered white rice.

RACHEL RODDY IS A FOOD WRITER BASED IN ROME



◀ **The rail taste** Rukmini Iyer's book was inspired by a train journey

35 *Number of days between Liz Truss resigning and the publication of Out of the Blue, a biography of the UK's shortest-serving PM*

▼ **Revolving door**
Boris Johnson was one of three prime ministers this year in the UK



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By *Alex von Tunzelmann*

HISTORY & POLITICS

The newsy wit of Marina Hyde, the historical roots of British nostalgia and insights on a divided US



The past few years have left many of us reeling, with events moving so fast that historians and political writers have been scrambling to catch up. Publishing lead times are months long: at least one biography of Liz Truss was scheduled for Christmas publication and has had to be rapidly rewritten. You can probably skip that. Instead, reach for the tonic of Marina Hyde's **What Just Happened?! Dispatches from Turbulent Times**. Based on her cult Guardian columns, Hyde's book takes us from the Brexit referendum of 2016, through the horrors of Donald Trump and the Covid-19 pandemic, to Boris Johnson finally being prised out of 10 Downing Street in 2022 ("Johnson is leaving office with the same dignity he brought to it: none. I've seen more elegant prolapses").

How did we get to this point, though? Among the books trying to make sense of that question is Hannah Rose Woods's **Rule, Nostalgia: A Backwards History of Britain**. This fascinating cultural history begins in 2021 and works its way back to 1530, revealing that every generation harks back to an imaginary golden era. Woods notes that the centre and left are not immune – as she says of Remainers: "Brexit-adjacent social media discussion drew on a seemingly bottomless enthusiasm for faux-archaic swearing: 'Cockwomble', 'Arsebadger', 'Wankpuffin'."

Every nation builds myths and fantasies about itself. **The Wrath to Come: Gone With the Wind and the Lies America Tells** by Sarah Churchwell is an urgent, searing analysis of America's psyche through the lens of Margaret Mitchell's bestselling 1936 novel, set during and after the Confederacy, and the blockbuster 1939 movie based on it. The book opens with Donald Trump's supporters storming the Capitol on 6 January 2021, waving Confederate battle flags. As Churchwell shows, the legacy of Gone With the Wind runs deep in US politics. The night before the film's Atlanta premiere there was a pageant at a plantation, during which a Black children's choir – dressed up in slave outfits – sang spirituals for an all-white audience nostalgic for the 1860s: "One of the little Black children dressed as a slave and bringing a sentimental tear to white America's eye was a 10-year-old boy named Martin Luther King Jr."

Looking at how ideologies can spread beyond borders, and the rebound, Kojo Koram's **Uncommon Wealth: Britain and the Aftermath of Empire** takes apart the assumption that former British colonies fell into inequality and insecurity after the British left because of their own innate dysfunctionality. Instead, Koram looks at how British capital, debt and asset-stripping continued to shape those countries' destinies – and how the same destructive policies have been advanced in Britain itself. His incisive section on Britannia Unchained – the now notorious 2012 book co-authored by Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng, among others – is a striking example that has only become more relevant since this book was published at the beginning of 2022.

The tumultuous relationship between the global south and the north is a central theme of Sally Hayden's unforgettable **My Fourth Time, We Drowned: Seeking Refuge on the World's Deadliest Migration Route**. Hayden's extraordinary reporting from migrant routes across north Africa, focusing on individual experiences, won the Orwell prize for political writing – it should be required reading for politicians on all sides.

Anyone interested in the uneasy faultlines running through Europe itself should pick up Timothy Phillips's **The Curtain and the Wall: A Modern Journey Along Europe's Cold War Border**. It traces the old iron curtain from the frozen north of Norway, round the Baltic, through Germany and the Balkans, and on to Azerbaijan. The result is an enthralling travelogue with jaw-dropping historical stories. Readers will come away with a deeper understanding of the background to Russia's (and the Soviet Union's) often difficult relationships with its neighbours.

With King Charles III now on the throne, we might look back to the days of the first King Charles. **The Siege of Loyalty House: A Civil War Story** is Jessie Childs's captivating tale of one royalist house holding out against the Roundheads. Her narrative is atmospheric, unflinching and witty, right down to the author's note explaining her spelling choices: "During an argument at a London apothecary in 1639, Sarah Wheeler called Samson Sheffield 'fatt gutts' (he had called her a whore, and her husband 'a rogue, a rascal, base fellow, a peasant, an apothecary slave and one that lived by the turds and farts of gentlemen'). It would be a shame, I think, to lose the visual thickening of those double 't's."

There is plenty to fear in our political future, yet there are also signs of hope. For a dose of both, try Maria Ressa's **How to Stand Up to a Dictator**. Ressa, the Filipino journalist who won the Nobel peace prize in 2021, has written an energetic book that is part memoir, part modern history of the Philippines and part call to arms. "It's going to get worse before it gets better," Ressa warns.

Another book that inspires hope – albeit cautiously – is Anand Giridharadas's **The Persuaders: Winning Hearts and Minds in a Divided Age**. Giridharadas looks at activists and politicians who have tried to reach out to people who don't agree with them, rather than writing them off (he avoids the contentious term "cancel culture"). This is a thoughtful exploration of the possibilities and limits of communication and change.

The history book that has made me laugh most this year is Mallory O'Meara's **Girly Drinks: A World History of Women and Alcohol**. O'Meara takes a wild ride from Sumerian beer goddess Ninkasi, via 12th-century Chinese poet Li Qingzhao, to the "Bahama Queen", gunslinging prohibition bootlegger Cleo Lythgoe. This feels like having cocktails with some of the most fascinating – and dangerous – women in history. Cheers!

ALEX VON TUNZELMANN IS A HISTORIAN, SCREENWRITER AND AUTHOR

By *Imogen Russell Williams*

CHILDREN & YOUNG ADULTS

Journeys through music, history, magic and more to challenge, engage and enthral younger readers

This has been an outstanding year for children's literature, with conservationist, comic, reflective and adventurous books all finding enthralled readers. In picture books, **Britannica's Baby Encyclopedia** by Sally Symes, illustrated by Hanako Clulow, is aimed at 0-3. Filled with topics such as numbers, shapes, animals and food, this is a big, bright, thoughtfully curated board book.

A gorgeous fable of self-acceptance, **The Midnight Panther** by Poonam Mistry follows small, shy Panther as he tries to emulate Lion's mane and Tiger's stripes before finding the courage to climb into the treetops. Mistry's simple story and stunning geometric artwork make this a picture book to remember.

A thematic departure for Oliver Jeffers, though illustrated in his characteristic luminous style, **Meanwhile Back on Earth** uses a car trip and a sibling squabble as a springboard for a journey through Earth's history, focusing on human conflict in this gently challenging picture book for readers of 5+.

Or take a journey through the history of music-making in **Listen to the Music** by Mary Richards, allowing children of 5+ to hear fragments of melody, ranging from a Mozart piano sonata to 1940s bebop. Engagingly written, and illustrated with charm by Caroline Bonne-Müller.

The Boy Who Lost His Spark by Maggie O'Farrell is perfect for sharing with 6+ readers. This tender tale's folkloric magic is heightened by Daniela Terrazzini's illustrations.

Inquiring readers of 7 or 8+ will relish **The Bedtime Book of Impossible Questions** by Isabel Thomas, illustrated by Aaron Cushley. Thomas explores conundrums such as, "Why am I me and not someone else?" It could ignite lifelong scientific curiosity.

Beautiful and compelling, **Tyger** by SF Said is imbued with rapture and menace by Dave McKean's chiaroscuro illustrations. Set in an alternative Britain where joy, compassion and creativity have been driven out, Tyger is a riveting 9+ adventure layered with meaning.

Another beautiful book with an allegorical theme is **Leila and the Blue Fox** by Kiran Millwood Hargrave. This ambitious novel for 9+, including Tom de Freston's glimmering illustrations, deals sensitively with trauma, conservationism and displacement.

Lastly, **The Tale of Truthwater Lake** by Emma Carroll follows Polly, living through a heatwave in 2032, as she discovers a drowned village revealed by drought and finds herself transported back to 1952, when the village was first flooded. This intensely readable novel shows the 9+ reader a vision of the past through a near-future lens.

IMOGEN RUSSELL WILLIAMS IS A CHILDREN'S BOOK CRITIC

▼ **Rock me Amadeus** (Clockwise from top) Listen to the Music, Leila and the Blue Fox, The Boy Who Lost His Spark







QUARTO; WALKER; TOM DE FRESTON



Young adults

Creature
Shaun Tan
This huge compendium of "paintings, drawings and reflections" is filled with Tan's "odd little interlopers" – the mysterious creatures he has drawn since childhood, "more humane for not being human". Its absorbing philosophical commentary and delightful beings will appeal to artistic 12+ dreamers.

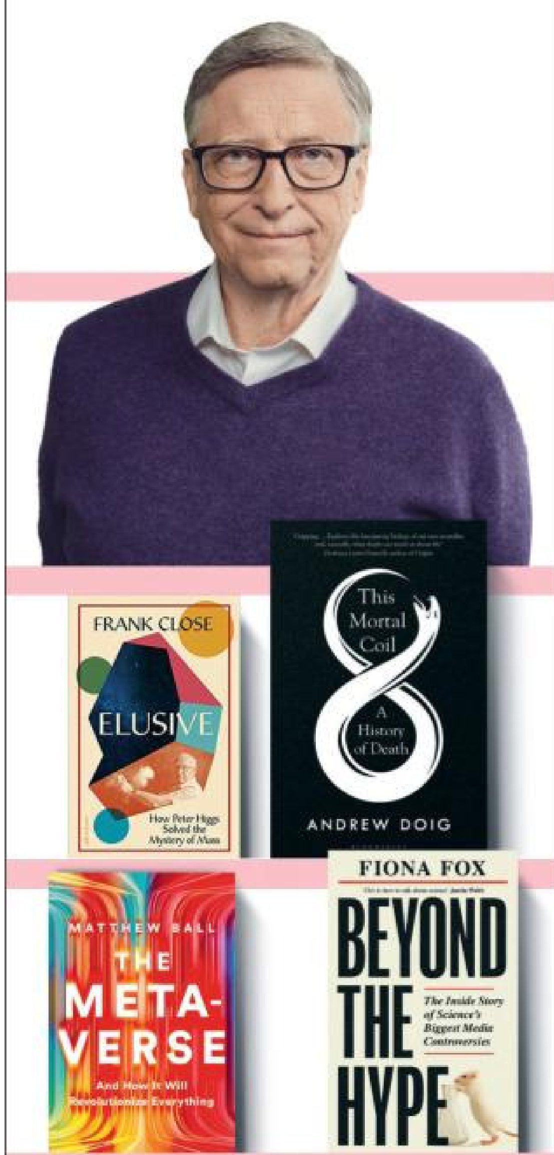
The Collectors
Philip Pullman, illustrated by Tom Duxbury
This short, disquieting tale has the feel of an MR James ghost story, with college setting, unsettling painting – and mysterious deaths. A perfect stocking filler for 12+ His Dark Materials fans.

Five Survive
Holly Jackson
Six teenagers are road-tripping, on their way to the beach for spring break, until their tyres are shot out and they face an ultimatum from the unseen marksman. One of them is keeping a deadly secret – and unless they surrender, all six are marked for death. A nail-biting thrill ride for 14+.

Well, That Was Unexpected
Jesse Q Sutanto
When 17-year-old Sharlot Citra gets caught in a compromising position, she's shipped off to Indonesia for the summer, her phone confiscated. And when George Clooney Tanuwijaya *also* gets caught in a compromising position, his family decides he needs a well-behaved girlfriend to get him back on track. Accidentally drawn together, can Sharlot and George have a chance at a real relationship? A hilarious, heartwarming YA novel, part romcom, part love song to Indonesia.

528 *Number of books published in 2022 and listed on Amazon with the word pandemic in the title*

▼ **Germ of an idea**
Bill Gates



By *Alok Jha*

SCIENCE

Preventing future pandemics, the secrets of the Higgs boson and the roots of plastic surgery



The Covid-19 pandemic might be fading into the background for many people in the rich world but Bill Gates, software pioneer and philanthropist, wants those in power to learn some lessons fast. In **How to Prevent the Next Pandemic**, he applies his technocratic approach to preparing the world for future public health emergencies. At the heart of Gates's plan is a new institution he calls Germ (Global Epidemic Response and Mobilisation), composed of a few thousand experts – from epidemiologists to vaccinologists to diplomats – who would be on standby in case of a global threat. In between emergencies, this group would go around the world to strengthen pandemic-prevention infrastructure and encourage governments to keep spending on things like disease-monitoring and scientific research. None of the ideas in the book are radical, but, given who is making the recommendations, people with the power to make change may finally listen.

The tail end of the pandemic is also a good time to read **Beyond the Hype** by Fiona Fox, chief executive of the Science Media Centre in London. This is the story of how science's place in society has changed in recent decades. During the early days of Covid-19, the British government made a point of repeatedly saying it would "follow the science" when deciding how to respond. A cast of experts appeared on TV, radio and elsewhere to talk epidemiology, virology, drug discovery and much more. Things were not always like this. The fact that scientists have gone from being remote elites to accessible experts involved in public conversations has benefited us all.

In **This Mortal Coil**, Andrew Doig, a biochemist at the University of Manchester, charts the fascinating history of how humans die. And if you think this might be a rather morbid topic, worry not. Despite some gruesome descriptions of disease and death, Doig tells an uplifting tale of how human ingenuity over the past few thousand years has allowed more of us to survive, and survive longer – first through innovations such as farming, and then by applying reason and evidence to health, defeating a host of major infectious diseases.

On 8 October 2013, I was in the Guardian newsroom, covering that year's announcement of the Nobel prize in physics. In **Elusive**, Frank Close, a physicist at the University of Oxford, tells the story of Peter Higgs, announced that afternoon as one of the winners. He won the Nobel for an idea that had been published in 1964 – a way to explain why fundamental particles have mass. Incorporating the famous Higgs boson, it subsequently became a cornerstone of theoretical physics. Close's book not only explains how Higgs's idea came about but also the decades-long effort to design, build and execute the vast experiment – the Large Hadron Collider at Cern in Geneva – that eventually found the boson in 2012.

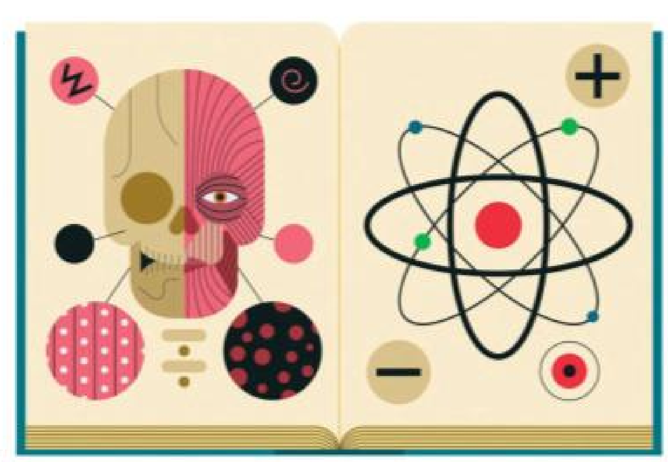
You may not have heard the word metaverse before 2021. Today it's hard to escape it. For those who want to understand where the promise of this technology really lies, **The Metaverse** by Matthew Ball is the place to start. Ball has worked in the tech industry and watched the development of 3D virtual worlds in computer games. He understands the potential for digital virtual worlds to become useful in other parts of life. But, crucially, he is no booster for any particular version of how the metaverse will turn out and is therefore a trusted guide.

Plastic surgery often gets a sniffy dismissal. But it is one aspect of an important enterprise born of war; one seeking to reconstruct bodies and lives after trauma. In **The Facemaker**, Lindsey Fitzharris, a medical historian, focuses on the work of Harold Gillies, the doctor considered the father of modern plastic surgery, who wanted to deal with the devastating effects of the bombs and guns used in the first world war. These weapons killed millions of people and maimed hundreds of thousands more. Gillies helped to invent the techniques – reconstructive surgery, bone and skin grafts – to try to give soldiers back some of their dignity.

Sticking with human bodies, if you want to know what you are actually made of, you would do well to consult **Song of the Cell** by Siddhartha Mukherjee. The oncologist and author looks deep into the biology of human beings to explain what these basic functional units look like, the myriad ways in which they work and how scientists, from the 19th century onwards, uncovered all of that knowledge. Given that all illnesses, from infections to cancer, involve cells going wrong or being compromised in some way, the quest to truly understand them is an urgent, ongoing tale.

The information we process through our senses is only a small fraction of what's going on out there. In **An Immense World**, Ed Yong takes us on a tour of the diverse ways in which animals perceive things. Bats, famously, "see" by emitting sound waves and analysing what comes back. Bees can sense electric fields around flowers. Yong's colourful writing reveals a multidimensional world that has hitherto remained hidden to us. He also issues a warning – noise and light pollution in cities can have serious impacts on animals, confounding their sensory worlds and sometimes leading them into danger.

ALOK JHA IS SCIENCE CORRESPONDENT FOR THE ECONOMIST


JOHN KEATLEY

By *Alexis Petridis*

MUSIC

Black women in pop, British heavy metal and the story behind Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep







▼ **Mullet over** Bono shares tales from his life in rock and campaigning
PETER STILL/REDFERNS

▲ **A man's world** Eurovision song contest winners the Brotherhood of Man
UNITED ARCHIVES/ALAMY

Rock and pop music has been obsessed with its own past from the start: by 1959, a New York record store called Times Square was doing a roaring trade in what it called "oldies", selling mid-50s doo-wop singles to teenagers already convinced the golden age of rock'n'roll was over. That said, a kind of industrialised nostalgia took root in the early 90s, the era of the heritage rock magazine and the lavish retrospective CD box set. Thirty years on, there's a nagging sense that all the great stories about pop's history might have already been explored - an idea to which Danyel Smith's **Shine Bright: A Very Personal History of Black Women in Pop** is a necessary corrective. A blend of memoir and penetrating analysis, it deals in righting wrongs or highlighting oversights. These are usually born out of a lethal cocktail of racism and sexism, not least in the story of the Sweet Inspirations. Best known as Elvis Presley's backing singers, Smith recasts them as pivotal figures in the development of US pop, the thread that links Van Morrison to Whitney Houston and Paul Simon to Aretha Franklin.

Will Hodgkinson's **In Perfect Harmony: Singalong Pop in 70s Britain** also feels fresh. You can understand why no one previously bothered to tell the stories behind the novelty singles and middle-of-the-road pop that clogged up the charts in the decade of punk and disco but, in doing so, Hodgkinson uncovers a fascinating lost world. You don't have to possess an abiding passion for the oeuvre of the New Seekers or Brotherhood of Man to revel in its plethora of bizarre facts and anecdotes, many of which speak loudly about the Britain of their era. Consider the lot of Scotland's Middle of the Road, hoisted to vast fame in Italy thanks to the deathless hit Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep: temporarily relocated to Rome, enjoying a whirlwind of luxury hotels, fine dining and hanging out with Sophia Loren, one member quits and returns to Glasgow, not due to musical differences, but because he can't stand Italian food.

Similarly revealing is Nick Duerden's **Exit Stage Left: The Curious Afterlife of Pop Stars**, which rounds up the sagas of those artists whose moment of fame was fleeting: from the heroin-addled Peter Perrett of the Only Ones to Paul Cattermole, formerly of teen band S Club 7, who wound up on a TV talk show, revealing that he now lived in such penury that he ate only instant noodles and that the show had to buy him a shirt so he had something to wear on air. Sometimes redemptive and moving - but frequently ghastly - it's never less than gripping.

At the other extreme are the books that work by retelling well-worn stories in a fresh light: there have already been plenty of books about hip-hop and heavy metal, but Jonathan Abrams's **The Come Up** and former Guardian music editor Michael Hann's **Denim and Leather** are two oral histories that deserve to be considered definitive. Abrams's book concentrates on hip-hop's rise, perfectly capturing the excitement of its gathering momentum and spread, taking the time to dig deeper than the big names. Hann zeroes in on the New Wave of British Heavy Metal that proliferated in the late 70s and early 80s, making stars of Iron Maiden and Def Leppard in the process. But it's the bathos of the genre's also-rans, with their disastrous homemade pyrotechnics and their careers stymied because the singer insists on appointing his mum as manager, that stay with you.

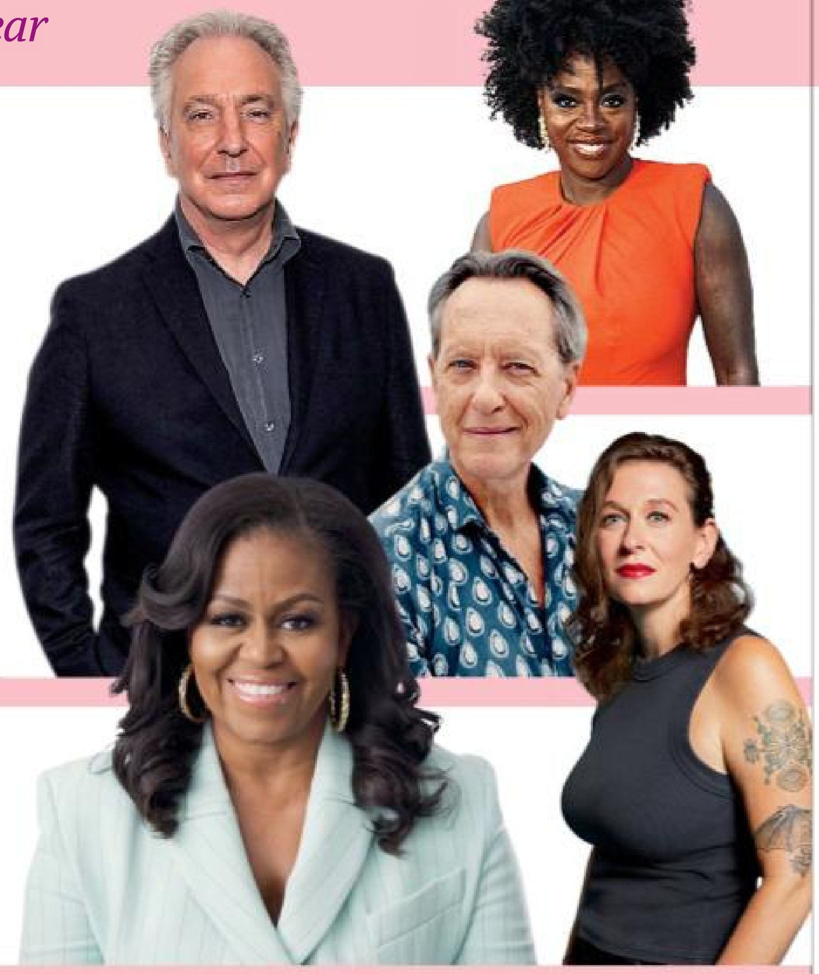
A lack of success has never been Bono's problem, as evidenced by his autobiography **Surrender: 40 Songs, One Story**. It's a little overlong and overwritten - this is a book that contains a stream-of-consciousness description of the author's birth. But his life has been so varied that the sheer volume of extraordinary stories, with walk-on roles for everyone from Frank Sinatra to Steve Jobs to several US presidents, outweighs the irritation of its more purple moments.

ALEXIS PETRIDIS IS THE GUARDIAN'S HEAD ROCK AND POP CRITIC

By *Fiona Sturges*

PEOPLE

Autobiographies with a fresh perspective, plus insights into Agatha Christie and John Donne



▶ **Me, myself, I**
From left: Alan Rickman, Michelle Obama, Richard E Grant, Viola Davis, CJ Hauser

Celebrity memoirs often follow the same trajectory: a difficult childhood followed by early professional failure, then dazzling success and redemption. But this year has yielded a handful of autobiographies from famous types determined to mix things up. Richard E Grant's vivacious and heartfelt **A Pocketful of Happiness** recounts a year spent caring for his late wife, Joan Washington, who was diagnosed with lung cancer shortly before Christmas in 2020, and the "head-and-heart-exploding overwhelm" that followed. The book interweaves hospital appointments with showbiz stories of Grant at the Golden Globes, or hijinks on the set of Star Wars. This juxtaposition of glamour and grief shouldn't work, but it does.

Minnie Driver's **Managing Expectations** comprises spry and amusing autobiographical essays that detail pivotal moments in the actor's life. These include the time her father sent her home to England from Barbados alone, aged 11, including a stopover at a Miami hotel, as punishment for being rude to his girlfriend (Driver got her revenge by buying up half the gift shop on her dad's credit card).

Alan Rickman's **Madly, Deeply** diaries provide insight into the late actor, who frets over roles and rails at the perceived ineptitude of script writers, directors and co-stars. He keeps glittering company, hobnobbing with prime ministers and Hollywood megastars, and almost single-handedly keeps the tills ringing at the Ivy.

In **Finding Me**, the actor Viola Davis gives a clear-eyed account of her deprived childhood and her rise to fame, along with the violence, abuse and racism she endured along the way.

In **The Light We Carry**, Michelle Obama also touches on the expectations that dog anyone trying to make it in a world that sees them as different, or deficient. "I happen to be well acquainted with the burdens of representation and the double standards for excellence that steepen the hills so many of us are trying to climb," she writes. "It remains a damning fact of life that we ask too much of those who are marginalised and too little of those who are not."

The journalist Chitra Ramaswamy's touching memoir **Homelands** documents the author's friendship with 97-year-old Henry Wuga, who escaped Nazi persecution as a teenager and began a new life in Glasgow. Ramaswamy digs deep into identity, belonging and home.

The Crane Wife, by the American author CJ Hauser, began life as a confessional essay about the time she travelled to the Texas to study whooping cranes 10 days after breaking off her engagement. The essay blew up online, prompting Hauser to expand her thoughts on love and relationships into this fitfully funny book.

Finally, some excellent biographies. **Agatha Christie: A Very Elusive Woman** by Lucy Worsley is a riveting portrait of the queen of crime viewed through a feminist lens. **Super-Infinite**, winner of this year's Baillie Gifford prize, is a biography of the 17th-century preacher and poet John Donne by Katherine Rundell, the children's novelist and Renaissance scholar. Jonathan Freedland's **The Escape Artist** is a remarkable account of the life of Rudolf Vrba, a prisoner at Auschwitz who was put to work in "Kanada", a store of belongings removed from inmates which revealed that the line fed to them was a lie: they were not there to be resettled but murdered. Freedland recalls the words of the French-Jewish philosopher Raymond Aron, who, when asked about the Holocaust, said: "I knew, but I didn't believe it. And because I didn't believe it, I didn't know."

FIONA STURGES IS AN ARTS WRITER

By *Adam Roberts*

SCIENCE FICTION

A deep-space community, a compelling critique of empire, time travel and a UFO novel like no other



DAVID M BENETT/GETTY; NAACP/GETTY; SOPHIA SPRING; WILLY SANJUAN/INVISION/AP; CHANTEL KING

12 *Number of new Miss Marple stories published in 2022, written in homage to Agatha Christie's feminist icon*

Deep Wheel Orcadia
Harry Josephine Giles
Winner of the 2022 Arthur C Clarke award, this is a remarkable feat: a verse novel written in Orcadian Scots, with a lively and inventive southern English translation running along the bottom of the pages. If that sounds forbidding, it shouldn't: it's a rattling read. Two characters arrive at the titular deep-space station, joining a "tossedawkward mix of people" who mine a strange substance called Light. The book is an unforgettable engrossment in community and estrangement.

Babel
RF Kuang
Kuang's bestselling alternative history is a complicated love letter to Oxford, encompassing both its beauty and its complicity with the horrors of imperialism. In the novel's version of 1828, Britain runs on magical "silver", and has used its power to conquer much of the world. The novel is part fluently written narrative, part expert pastiche of academic writing. A compelling fable, with teeth.

Sea of Tranquility
Emily St John Mandel
The author of Station Eleven weaves a cunning time-travel narrative from four main strands. Edwin St Andrew is crossing the Atlantic in 1912; in the 23rd century, Olive Llewellyn travels from her moonbase home for a book tour on Earth; in 2020, a teenage girl goes into woodland with a video camera. And in another century, a detective investigates a mystery in the North American wilderness. The novel builds an inexorable momentum as the various elements cohere. Remarkable work from one of the genre's major voices.

Beyond the Burn Line
Paul McAuley
A UFO novel like no other. In McAuley's far future, lights in the sky and alien craft are being observed by the uplifted forms of animal life that replaced human beings after our extinction. The slow-burn story so beguiles the reader that twists and plot reveals are kept effortlessly out of view until being unveiled with maximum effect.

Goliath
Tochi Onyebuchi
It's the 2050s, and the wealthy are abandoning Earth for more congenial lives in hi-tech space colonies. The poor struggle in the collapsing infrastructure as the rich buy up souvenirs of their old lives. This is a structurally ambitious novel, fired up with righteous energy. A satire on gentrification, Goliath is a giant achievement.

ADAM ROBERTS IS A SCIENCE FICTION WRITER AND PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH

By *Jonathan Liew*

SPORT

A celebration of Black footballers, a fresh look at Boycott, plus the rise and demise of a great cyclist



▼ **Star quality**
England forward Raheem Sterling
FRANK AUGSTEIN/AFP/GETTY



A Delicate Game: Brain Injury, Sport and Sacrifice
Hana Walker-Brown
Walker-Brown takes us on a heartbreaking journey through the human debris of sport, from bereaved families to ex-athletes slowly losing their faculties to dementia. She asks why sports such as football and rugby union have proved so resistant to reform or even basic responsibility. The answers, she argues, are social and cultural: sport's sanctification of pain and suffering, often framed within Christian ideals of masculinity. And, of course, money has plenty to do with it.

A New Formation: How Black Footballers Shaped the Modern Game
Edited by Calum Jacobs
This is not a book about racism, politics, immigration or the media. Rather, it is a celebration of the contribution Black British footballers have made to the game, told through sharply written essays placing them in their social and sporting context: Raheem Sterling's story is filtered through the lens of the Windrush generation.

Being Geoffrey Boycott
Geoffrey Boycott and Jon Hotten
This fascinating account offers a new perspective on one of English cricket's most complex characters. Part memoir and part biography, it's a book about obsession: the angst and fear of top-level sport, where the most scrutinised person on the field is also the loneliest.

Expected Goals: The Story of How Data Conquered Football and Changed the Game Forever
Rory Smith
Football has undergone a spectacular data revolution. Smith's book succeeds in eschewing the boring stuff about stats in favour of a story about people: about doubt and persuasion, insiders and outsiders. And mercifully, there isn't a single graph or table in the entire book.

God Is Dead: The Rise and Fall of Frank Vandenbroucke, Cycling's Great Wasted Talent
Andy McGrath
In 2009, Frank Vandenbroucke was found dead in a hotel room in Senegal at the age of 34, with insulin and sleeping pills near his bedside. The last person to see him alive was a sex worker who had accompanied him there. The fact that we know the tragic ending of this story is what lends such a devastating quality to McGrath's biography. Soberly told and with an affection for its subject, McGrath's account explores the narcotically corrupting power of sport itself.

JONATHAN LIEW IS A SPORTSWRITER FOR THE GUARDIAN

QUIZ
Thomas Eaton

1 Which US president won the Nobel peace prize and the Medal of Honor?
2 What peaked at $68,789 in November 2021?
3 Which fellow dystopian taught George Orwell at Eton?
4 What is the national fruit of Jamaica?
5 Five-year-old Margaret Theresa is the main figure in which group portrait?
6 What is now officially Yr Wyddfa?
7 Which Islay whisky advertised its taste as "burning hospital"?
8 Who contested the 1972 World Chess Championship?
What links:
9 African ground squirrel; Mexican hairless dog; translucent fish; Sabine's gull?
10 Henry I; John; James II; William IV; George VI?
11 The 400 Blows; Amarcord; Radio Days; The Souvenir; The Fabelmans?
12 Australia (12); Great Britain (3); New Zealand (1)?
13 Longbridge; Cowley; Dagenham; Halewood; Luton?
14 Photograph; flags; feather; hammer; golf balls; human waste?
15 Red; Leon; Mina; Lucy Barton?

PUZZLES
Chris Maslanka

1 Wordpool
Find the correct definition:
LAMPYRIDINE
a) pertaining to glow-worms
b) non-stick compound
c) predacious
d) Lambton worm

2 E Pluribus Unum
Rearrange *TEA IN URNS* to make a single word.

3 Wordcentre
Replace each asterisk by a letter to make a word:
****HEAR****

4 3-4-5
Opening within grasp, oddly (3)
Single fish (4)
Centre of Mass? (5)

5 Cracker Barrel
Which king of England worked as a podiatrist?

© CMM2022

EMOJI SPEAK
Killian Fox

Guess the movies featured in a recent greatest films of all time poll.

1 2 3 4 5



Answers
Quiz 1 Theodore Roosevelt (Medal of Honor posthumously). **2** Bitcoin value. **3** Aldous Huxley. **4** Ackee. **5** Las Meninas by Velázquez. **6** Snowdon. **7** Laphroaig. **8** Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky. **9** Animals beginning with X: xerus; xolo; x-ray tetra; xeme. **10** Monarchs who succeeded their brother. **11** Autobiographical/semi-autobiographical films about directors' youth: François Truffaut; Federico Fellini; Woody Allen; Joanna Hogg; Steven Spielberg. **12** Wins in the rugby league World Cup (men's). **13** Centres of UK car manufacturing. **14** Items left on the moon. **15** My Name Is … novels: Orhan Pamuk; Kit de Waal; David Almond; Elizabeth Strout. **Emoji 1** 2001: A Space Odyssey. **2** Singin' in the Rain. **3** The Godfather. **4** Jeanne Dielman. **5** Vertigo. **Maslanka 1** a). **2** SATURNINE. **3** DISHEARTEN (MISHEARING, BIGHEARTED). **4** GAP, SOLE, ALTAR. **5** William the corn-curer.

CHESS
Leonard Barden

Bodhana Sivanandan earned a place in the record books this month when the seven-year-old from Harrow tied for second prize in the UK women's blitz championship at Leamington Spa.

As joint winner of the English title, she broke the age record for a national women's champion by more than four years in a remarkable performance against opposition led by internationally seasoned rivals.

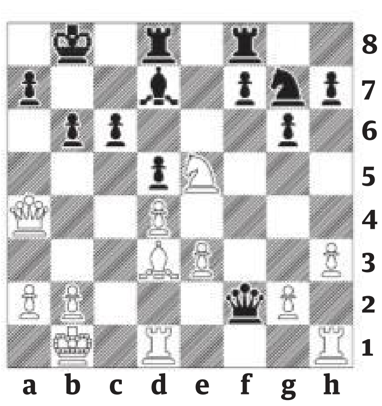
The open winner was Elmira Mirzoeva, 41, a former Moscow women's champion now resident in London and playing under a neutral Fide flag.

Sivanandan shared the English title with Sussex-based Kamila Hryshchenko, 20, who as a Ukrainian was 2019 world girls' under-18 blitz champion.

Sivanandan is 2022 world under-eight girls' champion at rapid and blitz. Her overall performance was rated at 2076 Fide blitz points, master standard, and her Fide rating jumped from 1556 to 1884.

Away from the UK blitz, Ian Nepomniachtchi (of Russia, playing under a Fide flag) is likely to meet China's Ding Liren for the world title in Mexico City in April 2023.

3845 Onischuk v Grover, Mexico 2016. White to move and win. Black is a pawn up in this all-grandmaster game. After White's next move Black immediately resigned. What was the knockout punch?



3845 1 Qa3! Resigns. The winning double threat is **2** Qd6+ Kc8 **3** Ba6 mate and **2** Nxd7+ Rxd7 **3** Qxf8+ with **4** Qxg7

✱ On the website **Notes and Queries** *theguardian.com/notes-and-queries*

COUNTRY DIARY
SPURN POINT
East Yorkshire, England, UK

It's possibly odd to suggest this 5km-long finger of sand, marram grass and buckthorn spine pointing toward oblivion in the North Sea is my key foundational landscape. In truth, I'd neglected to visit for 45 years.

Throughout my youth, this rather unloved fragment of Holderness was the map on which most of my dreams were fixed. It's where I recorded a first whimbrel, and heard my first grey plover, that exquisite note coming like liquid melancholy out of the Humber mist. I recall clearly the moment, aged 13, when I laid first eyes on a golden oriole.

It's now stranger to describe Spurn as foundational, given that it's the most rapidly eroding British coastline. For many of us, favourite places are the fixed points against which we chart our own wanderings, but when I returned this month, while I seemed almost the same, Spurn was weirdly unfamiliar. Gone were the tank blocks, the lighthouse cottages and not just the old railtrack to Spurn Point but the road itself.

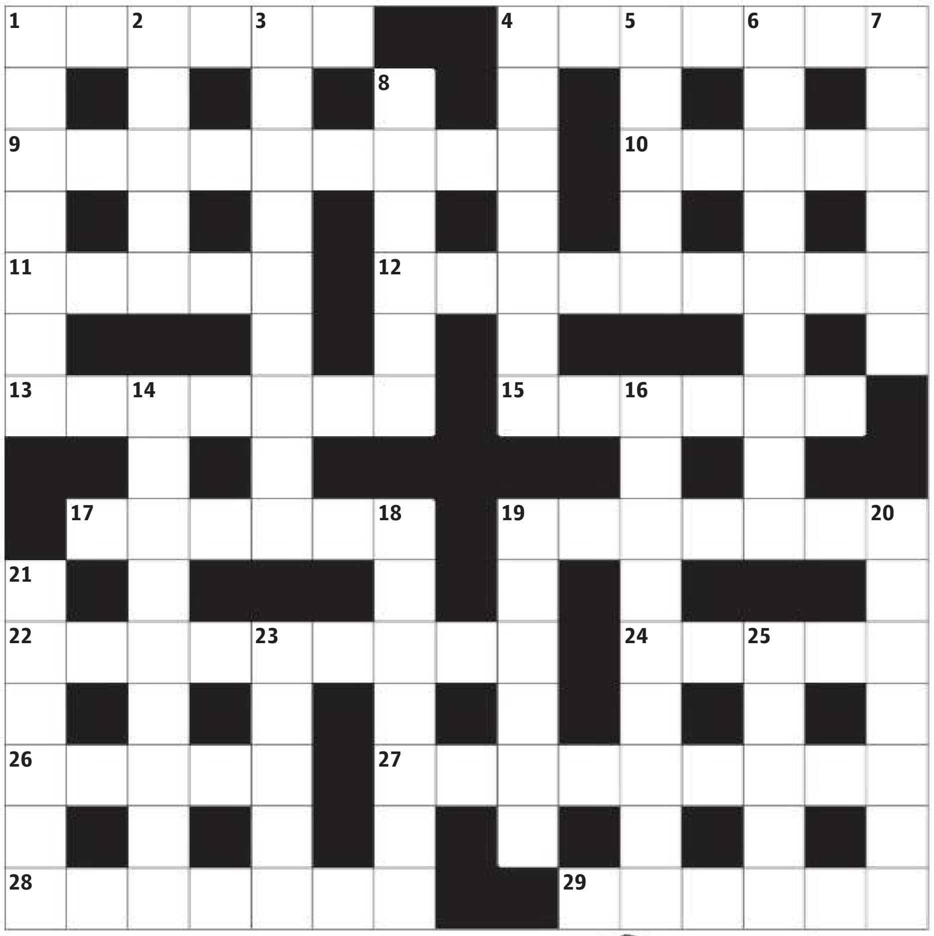
The most telling is a wall plaque at the old Bluebell shop, commemorating its distance from the sea in 1847: 532 yards (486 metres). A 1994 inscription adjusted it to 190 yards (174m) and I paced it out to the tideline to bring the figure up to date: 135 steps.

Spurn is still a wonderful mainland location to observe bird migration, and twice daily the tide withdraws deep into the Humber, leaving an immense plain of mud, where 135,000 waterbirds come to feed. Yet there was one change we delighted to note. In 1880, the naturalist John Cordeaux described how, as the "sun dips beyond the western world … the oozy mudflats are purple with reflected light". We logged the colour as a pale orange marble. *Mark Cocker*



ILLUSTRATION: CLIFFORD HARPER

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* All solutions published next week

The Weekly cryptic
No 28,933



By *Qaos*

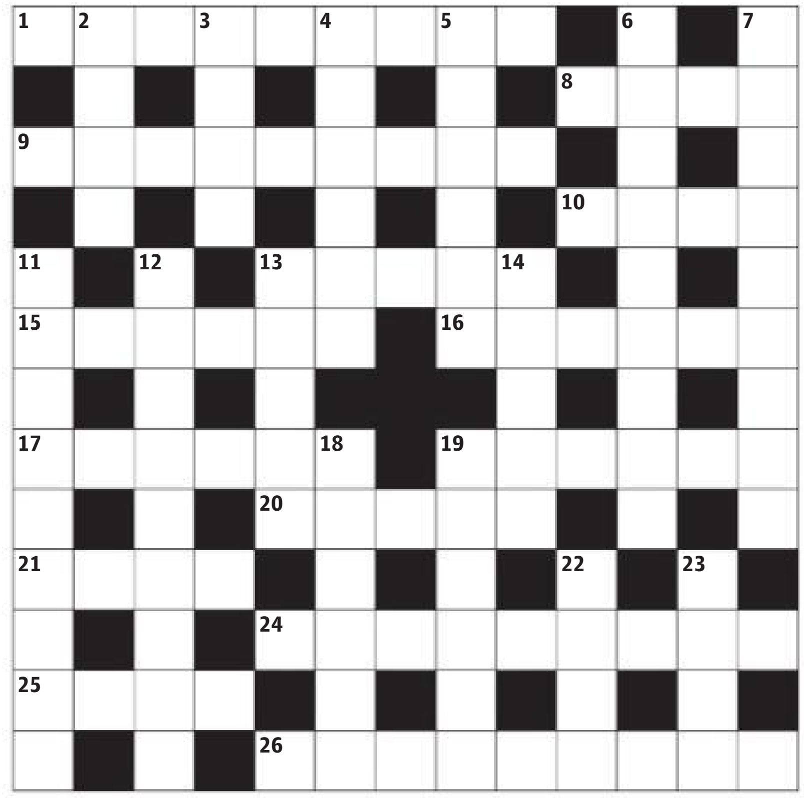
Across
1 Pub holds back 12 bottles of wine for festival (6)
4 Provider of juice to warhorse (7)
9 Members of the clergy 2 and 3? (9)
10 Cereal for everyone kept in barrel (5)
11 Dog free of lead, might one take flight? (5)
12 Politician caught in awkward recline with unnatural material (9)
13 Put away slice (7)
15 Looter's assistant breaks into expensive car (6)
17 God sleeps on (or kips inside) in retirement (6)
19 Ranked 'secret', provided I quit (7)
22 See how day developed with make-up (9)
24 Outspoken pub reducing headcount by 90%? (5)
26 Colossal insect chasing soldier (5)
27 At first, critics likely upset if shown Finding Nemo? (9)
28 Vampire actor, he punctured child's skin and drew blood (7)
29 Stun grenade in China made of wood ends disastrously (6)

Down
1 Travellers going without support of boxers? (7)
2 A little bit of sherbet for good kid (5)
3 Standard Catholic ceremony on top of wrought iron (9)
4 Dismiss bank clerk (7)
5 Sum 500 + 500 + 1? (3,2)
6 They take special need cutting wild grass, endlessly (9)
7 Engine to drive Jack over Egypt on vacation (6)
8 Golfer swaps one party for another to make birdie? (6)
14 Soap delayed? Missing one link (9)
16 500 against adult being bitten by naughty canine earlier (2,7)
18 Tempted by rum used about December (7)
19 Rogue trader's modest about fancy bow (6)
20 Strangely upholding skinless mammal, in the main (7)
21 Mountain lass found in area around Kolkata (6)
23 Couple's welcome to church – nothing's forgotten (5)
25 Conservative lawbreaker ignoring the first leader (5)

Solution No 28,927



Quick crossword
No 16,406



Across
1 Down and out (9)
8 Basketball player's goal (4)
9 Happening very fast and unexpectedly (9)
10 Ice mass (4)
13 Glances over (5)
15 Act of aggression (6)
16 Hold it to keep silent (6)
17 Be about to topple over (6)
19 Current (6)
20 Biscuit eaten with ice cream (5)
21 Brother's headgear? (4)
24 Made in standard sizes and available from stock (3-3-3)
25 Balderdash (4)
26 Symbolise (9)

Down
2 Code word for E (4)
3 Academic session (4)
4 Sound of a hard hit? (6)
5 Renter (6)
6 Alien (9)
7 Kind of western (or junction in Birmingham?) (9)
11 Munch (9)
12 Different (9)
13 Propeller (5)
14 Serious (5)
18 Draw (6)
19 Senior university official (6)
22 Church seating (4)
23 List (4)

Solution No 16,400



Sudoku
Hard

Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the numbers 1 to 9.

						4		
		8		5		3		
	3				8	9	2	
				2	4		1	5
	5		6		1			
		3	8	7				
6	8	2						
		4	1					2
			4				8	

Last week's solution

7	3	6	5	2	9	8	1	4
9	1	5	7	4	8	6	3	2
8	4	2	1	3	6	9	5	7
6	2	1	9	5	4	3	7	8
3	8	9	2	6	7	5	4	1
5	7	4	8	1	3	2	9	6
4	5	7	3	8	2	1	6	9
2	9	3	6	7	1	4	8	5
1	6	8	4	9	5	7	2	3

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